Research Report

ARIANE M. TABATABAI, NATHAN CHANDLER, BRYAN FREDERICK, JENNIFER KAVANAGH

Iran's Military Interventions

Patterns, Drivers, and Signposts



For more information on this publication, visit **www.rand.org/t/RRA444-2**.

Published by the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available for this publication.

ISBN: 978-1-9774-0660-6

Cover: Iranian Army photo: Amin Bre/Alamy Stock Photo.

Preface

This report documents research and analysis conducted as part of a project entitled *Anticipating Adversary Interventions and Aggression*, sponsored by the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff, G-3/5/7, U.S. Army. The purpose of the project was to identify characteristics and signposts of adversary military interventions to better inform Army planning, operations, and force posture.

This research was conducted within RAND Arroyo Center's Strategy, Doctrine, and Resources Program. RAND Arroyo Center, part of the RAND Corporation, is a federally funded research and development center (FFRDC) sponsored by the United States Army.

RAND operates under a "Federal-Wide Assurance" (FWA00003425) and complies with the *Code of Federal Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects Under United States Law* (45 CFR 46), also known as "the Common Rule," as well as with the implementation guidance set forth in DoD Instruction 3216.02. As applicable, this compliance includes reviews and approvals by RAND's Institutional Review Board (the Human Subjects Protection Committee) and by the U.S. Army. The views of sources utilized in this study are solely their own and do not represent the official policy or position of DoD or the U.S. government.

Contents

Figures

Tables

Summary

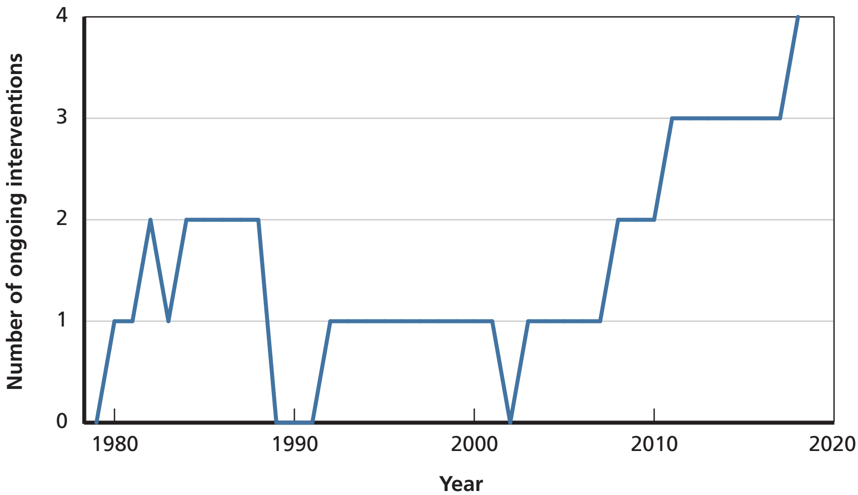
The research reported here was completed in July 2020, followed by security review by the sponsor and the Office of the Chief of Public Affairs, with final sign-off in July 2021.

In recent years, Iran has risen as one of the most significant regional challenges faced by the United States. Both the 2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy and the 2017 National Security Strategy place Iran among four countries at the center of U.S. national security priorities. The 2018 National Strategy for Counterterrorism cites Iranian-backed groups as primary threats.[1] Along with its nuclear and ballistic missile programs, Iran's direct and indirect military interventions in nearby countries directly challenge U.S. interests and U.S. Army personnel in the region. Over the course of its four decades of existence, the Islamic Republic of Iran has mostly relied on indirect involvement in conflict, working by, with, and through proxies to meet its security needs, advance its interests, and expand its influence in key countries. However, since roughly 2003 (following the U.S. invasion of Iraq), Iran has leveraged its military power in a more holistic way than in previous decades, and the country has undertaken more military interventions and done so more successfully than in the past. Figure S.1 shows the trends in the number of Iranian military interventions since the beginning of the period under consideration (which starts with the 1979 Islamic Revolution transforming Iran into a U.S. adversary after the U.S.-aligned and U.S.-backed Shah was deposed).

Despite this increase, the total number of Iranian interventions since 1979 remains relatively low, particularly compared with other U.S. adversaries, such as Russia or China. We identified only eight cases

[1] White House, *National Strategy for Counterterrorism of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C., October 2018.

Figure S.1
Annual Number of Ongoing Iranian Military Interventions (1979–2018)



meeting our definition of a foreign military intervention.[2] In addition, the threshold for Iran to deploy its ground troops in combat appears to be higher than the threshold to deploy its naval and air assets. Iran has largely refrained from committing troops in combat, instead opting to conduct small-scale and targeted airstrikes and engage in advisory missions (training, advising, and equipping its partners and proxies). With the exception of the Iran-Iraq War—in which Iraq started to invade parts of Iran's territory, requiring hundreds of thousands of troops mobilized to defend Iranian territorial integrity—the number of troops Iran has committed to its military interventions remains low. Despite being deployed in relatively low numbers, Iranian forces have undertaken a fairly diverse set of activities over the course of the past four decades, including interdiction, deterrence, advisory missions,

---

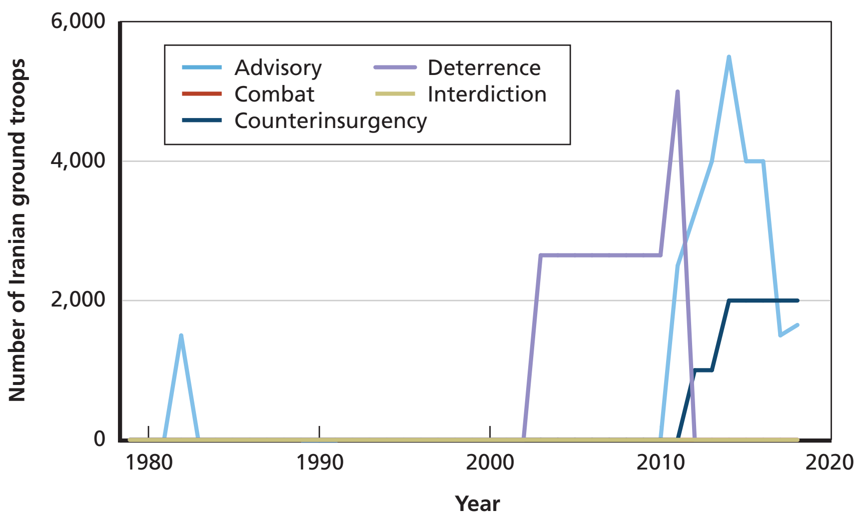
2 We define a *military intervention* as an any deployment of military forces to another country (or international waters or airspace) during the period 1946–2018 in which two additional parameters were satisfied regarding (1) the size of the force involved and (2) the activities in which the force was engaged. We set the force size threshold at 100 person-years for ground forces, with equivalent measures for air and naval forces. Qualifying activities include combat, advisory, deterrence, humanitarian, stabilization, and security.

combat, and counterinsurgency.[3] Figure S.2 shows the number of Iranian ground troops in military interventions (excluding the Iran-Iraq War) and the activity types they have undertaken in various conflicts.

Research Approach

In this report, we assess when, where, why, and how Iran conducts military interventions and identify key signposts of Iranian military interventions that can be used as early warning indicators for U.S. military planners and that can guide decisions about the use of forces in the Middle East region. We begin by identifying several factors from the prior literature as the most likely to shape Iran's military intervention decisions. In addition to reviewing past research on the factors that

Figure S.2
Number of Iranian Ground Troops Involved in Military Interventions, Excluding Iran-Iraq War, by Activity Type (1979–2018)



3 The main combat operation, the Iran-Iraq War, is not included because of its scale. We code Iranian activity in Iraq in recent years as primarily counterinsurgency, captured in Figure 3.4.

might influence Iranian military intervention decisions and a quantitative investigation of Iranian military interventions, we conduct two detailed case studies, of Iran's involvement in the ongoing Syrian civil war and Iran's post-2014 intervention in Iraq to counter the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which inform our analysis. Using these tools, we note that Iran's decision to put conventional combat troops on the ground in Syria was a departure from its modus operandi. The Syrian case may become an exception rather than the rule in Iranian military interventions. However, should Tehran decide to approach its military interventions differently in the future than it has over the past four decades and treat other opportunities for intervention as it has treated Syria, this would present the United States in general and the U.S. Army in particular with an enhanced Iranian threat.

Results of Analysis

Our analysis shows that several factors are most indicative of possible Iranian military interventions. First and foremost, the presence of co-identity group populations appears to be nearly a prerequisite for Iranian interventions. All Iranian interventions identified by and considered in our study have taken place in countries and theaters where co-identity group populations are present. The presence of these groups, which tend to be more amenable to looking to Iran for guidance and support, allows Tehran to rely on its preferred intervention model, which uses advise-and-assist missions, and to increase Iranian influence while limiting the costs associated with involvement in foreign conflicts. Importantly, Tehran is often able to forgo committing ground troops in a combat capacity to foreign interventions as a result of the presence of these local partners.

Second, our analysis emphasizes that external threats to sovereignty are an important factor in Iranian military interventions. Many of the instances of interventions we identified and explored in our study are intimately linked to and stem from an external threat perception. Moreover, we found that external threats have also mostly resulted in more-overt Iranian action, in large part because such action allows Iran

to conduct a messaging campaign around its activities and reassure domestic audiences, send signals to regional and international friends and foes, and legitimize its intervention. Iran has also leveraged external threats to legitimize its actions, galvanizing support at home, and expanding influence abroad. These findings suggest that Iran's rationale for intervening in conflicts has historically been largely defensive, although this trend may be changing. Iran's track record in the region more recently suggests that Iran's primary objective lies in expanding influence abroad as part of its efforts to enhance its regional security. Although the desire to expand Iranian influence in the region is almost certainly a driver of Iranian intervention, the country has largely seen its involvement beyond its borders through the prism of defense.

Finally, we found regional balance of power and stability to be a key factor driving Iranian military interventions, in keeping with the prior observation. As a conventionally weak, majority Shia and majority Persian nation existing in a region dominated largely by Sunni Arabs, Iran sees itself as fundamentally vulnerable. This perception provides the backdrop against which Tehran assesses its external threat environment. Moreover, since losing the backing of the United States and its traditional partnerships after the 1979 revolution, Iran has had few state allies. Hence, from Iran's perspective, unless it is able to build a more favorable regional balance of power, it will remain isolated and potentially vulnerable to existential threats from its most capable adversaries: the United States and Israel.

Signposts of Iranian Military Interventions

Our analysis points to several signposts that could allow policymakers and military planners to identify and anticipate Iranian military interventions going forward. First, the presence of co-identity group populations is of predictive value in anticipating Iranian interventions. Co-identity groups provide a natural opening to Iran because they can lead to the cultivation of partnerships with state and nonstate actors. Iran is most inclined to intervene using the advisory model and usually leverages existing ties to develop a principle-agent relationship with prox-

ies, which it can support during a conflict. We note that Syria presents a partial departure from this model because Iran has also recruited nonlocal foreign fighters to deploy in combat. In the future, Tehran may have two models of interventions it could leverage, as follows:

- First, it may continue its historical approach, which largely leverages advisory missions and is centered on the use of local forces from co-identity group populations. This is likely to constitute the majority of Iranian interventions and would, in any case, underpin virtually all of Iran's wars.
- Second (perhaps less frequently but more significantly), the Islamic Republic could use its Syrian intervention model, using its expansive network of proxies in an expeditionary manner, supplemented by its more-conventional forces.

Signposts for these types of interventions might include the presence of co-identity group populations, especially in instances in which these populations experience a change in status, such as facing a new threat to their livelihood or safety or the loss of political or other rights. Examples might include major political upheavals, arrests of political dissidents associated with these populations, gains and losses of political positions, and increases or decreases of attacks on these populations. Intervention may be especially likely in places where Iran has key partners and possible proxy groups with which to partner. The U.S. Army should monitor and attempt to disrupt flows of Iranian-backed forces used in an expeditionary manner and can use these signposts to identify those places where such activity may be likely.

Iran is also likely to commit troops in combat when it views the conflict as representing an external threat that is critical to its national security and regime survival and when it views the conflict as fairly low cost and a quick win. When threats and opportunities emerge simultaneously, Iran historically has been most likely to intervene. The collapse of regional governments, the onset of civil wars, and the rise and expansion of terrorist threats in the region are among the key threats that also present opportunities and lead to a likely Iranian intervention. Monitoring such events and considering especially the possible

threat they may pose to Iran's sense of security and the opportunities created for an Iranian intervention could provide U.S. military planners with early warning of specific regional events likely to trigger aggressive Iranian action. Jihadist groups gaining ground both present such a threat and offer such an opportunity, making it more likely that Iran will intervene (especially when combined with the first signpost: the presence of co-identity groups).

Finally, Iran is more inclined to intervene in the region when doing so has the potential to tilt the balance of power in its favor. Hence, Iran is most likely to intervene in states where an Iranian intervention would produce potential leverage over their behavior and where doing so would be important to the regional balance, which in turn relies on the existence of a friendly government or influential nonstate partners. These states include those whose governments (or key nonstate actors) have served as Iranian allies or partners and countries whose alignment with Iranian rivals would negatively affect Tehran. However, Tehran is much more likely to intervene in those states with weak central authorities and important cleavages. Fragile and failed states and countries engaged in civil war are therefore particularly ripe for Iranian intervention.

Implications for U.S. Army Planners

Our analysis also yields several key findings with implications for the U.S. Army, many of which confirm previous assumptions about Iranian military thinking. First, the U.S. Army is unlikely to need to plan for and prepare to respond to Iranian interventions beyond the greater Middle East. Since May 2019, Iran has undertaken several air and naval operations in the Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, and the Gulf of Oman, as well as airstrikes directly or via proxies in the Arabian Peninsula and in Iraq. This trend of growing aggressive action by Tehran might indicate a new willingness to challenge U.S. power and interests in the region. However, absent any major changes to our underlying assumptions about Iranian behavior and interests, the United States is

unlikely to witness and be required to respond to Iranian interventions beyond U.S. Central Command.

Second, the trends and patterns in Iranian military interventions indicate that Tehran continues to view direct involvement in large-scale combat missions as largely undesirable. Hence, unless Iran sees a threat as particularly pronounced, it is unlikely to commit its conventional ground assets to counter the threat directly, preferring instead to work by, with, and through proxies. Iran's track record of deploying troops in combat on only two occasions since 1979—the Iran-Iraq War and Syria—reinforces this point. In the case of the Iran-Iraq War, in which Iraq invaded Iranian territory, committing troops to combat was necessary and an action supported by the Iranian public. However, in the case of Syria, this deployment was highly controversial, partly because it was a war of choice. As a result, the U.S. Army is much more likely to encounter and engage with Iranian-backed nonstate partners in the region than it is to come face-to-face with Iranian personnel and troops. Where Iran does intervene, its preference historically has been to deploy air (mostly missiles and drones) and naval assets rather than conventional ground troops. The last time Tehran engaged in a large-scale combat intervention was more than three decades ago, when the country was attacked during the Iran-Iraq War. Hence, the main threats facing U.S. interests and partners and U.S. Army operations in the region most likely stem from Iran's missile and unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) programs rather than its ground forces.

Third, the United States in general and the U.S. Army in particular would be well-served by considering the lessons of the previous two decades of American involvement in the region, including U.S. policies and military strategies in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. Iranian decisionmakers and military planners have studied key events and adjusted their policies accordingly, which puts the onus on U.S. defense planners to stay a step ahead in this cat-and-mouse game. The combination of U.S. interventions in the region over the past two decades and instability resulting from the collapse of central authorities historically has paved the path for Iranian involvement in key countries. As the Iranian track record of military involvement in Iraq shows, Iran's interventions in Iraq were largely reduced to ad hoc airstrikes to target Mujahedin-e

Khalq (MeK) and Kurdish positions (i.e., primarily the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran, also known by the acronym KDP-I) there in the 1990s. However, following the 2003 U.S. intervention in Iraq, Iran gradually built its influence in that country. Overall, ethnic or sectarian tensions coupled with weak governments appear to facilitate Iranian interventionism. Accordingly, strong and inclusive central governments likely present an important bulwark against Iranian activities in the region.

The United States can use the signposts identified in this report to inform its use of military presence and activity in the region to deter Iran from undertaking a greater number of military interventions that threaten U.S. interests. In the short-to-medium term, the U.S. government in general and the U.S. Army in particular could leverage security cooperation with regional partners to prevent the weakening and collapse of central authorities and the threat of civil wars, which pave the way for Iranian involvement in the region. As noted earlier, particularly useful activities would be those that focus on capacity-building, such as training and transfer of equipment. The United States is already active in these areas with many of its regional partners, and this could be an area where additional effort and investment could be valuable. Increased numbers and types of exercises could have the dual purpose of increasing perceived readiness and actual readiness, deterring Iran on two fronts simultaneously.

Another near-term area of focus could be supporting jointness among regional allies so that they can operate more effectively as a collective against regional threats from Iran. Multilateral training initiatives alongside regional political and military cooperation could be effective in building stronger defense against Iranian provocation and activities. In terms of the types of training and equipment likely to be most valuable, emphasis on training and technology to defend against missile and UAV attacks may be important focal points of enhanced training and efforts at building multinational partnerships, since our analysis suggests these threats are especially likely. Given efforts to draw down U.S. forces in the region, this type of increased security cooperation activity could serve as a deterrent to Iranian intervention that has limited cost and requires limited additional investment of per-

sonnel or resources. Such an approach would also allow for a visible U.S. presence that would enhance the deterrent signal.

In the medium-to-long term, the United States can promote more-inclusive policies in partner governments in the region to reduce possible instability and eliminate possible areas of grievance that might attract Iranian intervention. The U.S. Army could, for example, use its military assistance as an incentive to help its partners behave more inclusively or use military assistance to support policies that bolster inclusivity. Security cooperation activities that build the capacity of partner militaries represent one potential way to build inclusive practices in the region without presenting a direct, escalatory threat. Especially important would be ensuring the inclusion of minority Shia populations in both governance and military activities because the exclusion of these groups could make a country the target of Iranian activity. More-inclusive governments may also reduce the risk of civil war (or at least lessen instability in the region), further reducing vulnerabilities that attract Iranian intervention. This may also be an area where partnerships between the U.S. military and nongovernmental organizations could be valuable in building state capacity throughout the region and limiting opportunities for future Iranian intervention.

This report could also inform decisions about U.S. posture in the region and efforts to ensure that U.S. forces are positioned most effectively to deter without provoking. U.S. forces in the region have a complex task in dealing with Iranian militarized behavior. Direct Iranian military interventions have become notably more frequent following the sharp increase in U.S. presence after the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq. In part, this increase reflects opportunism by Iran, seizing the opportunity to expand its influence in an increasingly chaotic region, but it has also been defensive in nature, seeking to increase its leverage to deter a feared U.S. strike on Iran using these same forces. If U.S. forces in the region needed only to be concerned about direct Iranian military interventions against U.S. partners, such as Kuwait or the Gulf states, then they likely could help to enhance deterrence with only limited size and capabilities, focusing on anti–unmanned aerial system and missile capabilities, as noted earlier. Iran has shown a clear reluctance to commit its conventional forces to direct combat missions,

and the prospects of a large-scale Iranian attack on a U.S. partner or ally appears remote. However, Iran's use of informal or proxy groups, while not the subject of this study, has often been substantially more opportunistic and more aggressive than its use of its formal military. U.S. forces in the region must deal with the risk of these types of Iranian activity as well, which may require a larger footprint and the ability to assist partners with advisory, training, and counterinsurgency capabilities. However, such forces need not necessarily be postured close to Iran's borders or be accompanied by higher-end conventional capabilities that would be seen as particularly threatening by Iran and could help touch off an escalation spiral, as both sides experienced in January 2020.

Finally, we note that some factors may change the Iranian way of war, including both internal and external factors. U.S. decisionmakers and military planners should track these developments and factors to ensure that the nature and threat posed by Iranian interventions does not fundamentally change without U.S. readiness to respond. Internally, perhaps the most significant change in Iranian military affairs may stem from the supreme leader succession. Ali Khamenei's death and the succession might have a deep impact on Iranian national security and defense thinking, including on the place and role of armed conflict, broad regional portfolios, and the dynamics between the clerical elements of the regime and the armed forces on the one hand and the different branches of the armed forces on the other. Hence, U.S. policy and military planners should pay close attention to the preparations for succession and its possible impact on Iranian military thinking.

Abroad, significant changes to the international system may result in Iranian motives changing and a recalibrated military intervention approach. The future of great-power competition and how it plays out in the Middle East, coupled with the regional landscape, are important factors that will shape how Iran sees its military activities. Increased Chinese and Russian military and economic presence in the region is likely to factor into Iranian calculations regarding the regional balance of power, and so is the dynamic among Beijing, Moscow, and Washington. Although a move away from a period of greater U.S. power

in the region would seem to provide fewer threats and more opportunities for Iran, the relations among these key states and how they affect Iranian perceptions of the regional balance of power bear careful monitoring.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank MG Bradley Gericke and MG Christopher McPadden (Ret.) and the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff, G-3/5/7, U.S. Army, for sponsoring the project. The authors are also grateful to Tony Vanderbeek, COL Jay Charland, and Cherie Emerson for their support throughout the research and writing of this report. The authors thank Sally Sleeper and Stephen Watts of the RAND Corporation for valuable feedback on earlier drafts. The authors are also indebted to Afshon Ostovar of the Naval Post Graduate School and Jeffrey Martini of RAND for their thoughtful and thorough reviews and suggestions.

Abbreviations

AQI	al-Qaeda in Iraq
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISI	Islamic State in Iraq
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
MeK	Mujahedin-e Khalq
NDS	National Defense Strategy
NSS	National Security Strategy
UAV	unmanned aerial vehicle

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Key U.S. adversaries, including Russia, China, and Iran, are becoming more active and more aggressive in deploying military forces beyond their borders. In the future, these adversary military interventions may become more common as great-power competition increases: Ongoing interventions might expand, and fresh ones might emerge in new areas, threatening U.S. interests and strategic goals. Yet relatively little prior analysis has been conducted to systematically and comprehensively compare why, when, where, and how America's key geopolitical rivals have historically intervened militarily. Understanding the historical factors that are most likely to drive leaders in these foreign capitals to deploy forces abroad can provide signposts for U.S. policymakers and military planners to anticipate future intervention behavior. This report, which is part of a series on several current U.S. adversaries, seeks to fill this gap through quantitative and qualitative analyses and provide U.S. Army strategic planning with recommendations to enhance anticipation of and posture readiness for future Iranian interventions.

Objective of This Report

In recent years, Iran has risen as one of the most significant regional challenges the United States faces. This rise is explained by myriad Iranian activities, including Tehran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs, support for terrorist groups and militias, cyber activities and influence operations, and military interventions in the region. The 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) placed Iran along-

side North Korea as dictatorships that are "determined to destabilize regions, threaten Americans and our allies, and brutalize their own people."[1] Similarly, the 2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy (NDS) identified Iran as one of four state actors at the center of U.S. national defense priorities, alongside two near-peer competitors (Russia and China) and fellow rogue regime North Korea. According to the NDS, "Rogue regimes such as North Korea and Iran are destabilizing regions through their pursuit of nuclear weapons and sponsorship of terrorism . . . In the Middle East, Iran is competing with its neighbors, asserting an arc of influence and instability while vying for regional hegemony."[2]

In some ways, Iran may appear out of place alongside two near-peer competitors (Russia and China) and a rogue state with nuclear capabilities (North Korea). Unlike the three other nation-states identified in the NSS and NDS, Iran is not a nuclear-armed state, although Iran has raised concerns of nuclear weapon acquisition in the United States and among U.S. allies and partners through its past nuclear weapon–related research and development. Similarly, Iran does not possess considerable conventional military capabilities or military power potential to compete in the same category as Russia and China. However, Tehran occupies an important place in U.S. national security considerations in large part because of its involvement and influence in several key countries in the region. At the time of writing, Iran is involved directly or indirectly (via proxies) in such countries as Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Israel and Palestine thanks to ground, air, and covert operations, as well as naval operations in the Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, Gulf of Oman, Gulf of Aden, and Bab al-Mandab.

Of concern for U.S. defense leadership, our analysis shows that despite a relatively low number of historical Iranian foreign military interventions—we could identify fewer than ten cases meeting our

---

1 White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C., December 2017, p. 2.

2 Jim Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, Arlington, Va.: U.S. Department of Defense, 2018, p. 2.

intervention definition since 1979, when Tehran became a U.S. adversary after decades of partnership—Iran seems to have increased the breadth and depth of these operations in recent years. The rate of success at which Tehran has achieved the political objectives of its military interventions seems to have also increased since the 1990s, though it must be noted that, given the small number of overall Iranian interventions, it is difficult to assess whether these increases are likely to be durable or not. Moreover, given the state of play in the region, including tensions between the United States and Iran in the Persian Gulf and broader Middle East region and the close proximity of U.S. and Iranian forces, partners, and proxies, understanding Tehran's playbook is more important than ever. Although much of the literature on the Iranian way of war still focuses on the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), the country's military strategy, doctrine, and operations have evolved since then. And although the Iran-Iraq War remains a formative experience that continues to shape Iranian thinking, it is critical to understand Iran's current military interventions to draw lessons for how they might affect ongoing and future U.S. Army operations in the region and broader U.S. government policy toward Iran and the Middle East. Since the Iran-Iraq War, Iran's pattern of military interventions has undergone major changes.

Aside from the Iran-Iraq War, which was initiated by Iraq, the first two decades of Iran's existence were largely marked by a reluctance to deploy troops outside the country's borders, with a particular reluctance to do so in combat missions. After the end of the war, the number of troops deployed in military interventions fell drastically. Airstrikes conducted throughout the 1990s in Iraq against key nonstate adversaries and the cultivation of and support for friendly nonstate actors were at the heart of Tehran's military activities abroad. The 2001 U.S. intervention in Afghanistan and subsequent 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq seemingly paved the way for a more robust Iranian military presence outside its borders. However, the country mostly continued to leverage its nonstate partners to build and grow its influence in the region. Hence, the 2000s were marked by Iranian covert operations in neighboring countries, mostly according to the advisory mission model, which would come to dominate Tehran's approach to military

interventions. Iran has also engaged in counterinsurgency operations, as well as deterrence and interdiction missions.

This gradual expansion of Iranian military activities outside the country culminated in 2011 with the advent of the Arab Spring, which opened up new areas of operation for Iran and provided it with the opportunity to expand its presence in the Middle East. The 2014 rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) created a threat environment that, from Tehran's perspective, both necessitated and facilitated its growing regional presence. Since 2011, Iran has complemented its traditional advisory missions and airstrikes by deploying troops in a combat mission. Today, Iran leverages its military power in a more holistic way than it did in previous decades, although the threshold for Iran to deploy its ground troops in combat appears to be higher than that to deploy its naval and air assets. Nevertheless, Iran's preference remains to work by, with, and through proxies rather than to deploy its own forces to avoid stretching itself too thin, to be able to project power in more arenas, to build influence at a low cost, and to avoid backlash against its operations.

For this report, we focus on a specific subset of Iran's military activities: those meeting a size threshold and conducted by Iran's military directly. We define a *military intervention* as any deployment of military forces to another country (or international waters or airspace) during the period 1946–2018 in which two additional parameters were satisfied regarding (1) the size of the force involved and (2) the activities in which the force was engaged. In the case of Iran, we include only interventions that occurred after the 1979 revolution, at which point we consider Iran to have become a U.S. adversary.

The purpose of the size threshold was to create a universe of cases that could be comprehensively and reliably surveyed (smaller interventions may be more difficult to find information on and may be inconsistently reported) and to focus attention on those adversary interventions most likely to pose challenges for U.S. forces. To qualify as an intervention on the basis of ground forces, the deployment should have included military personnel from any service branch deployed for at least 100 person-years. This size threshold could include 100 troops deployed for one year or a larger number of troops deployed

for a shorter period (e.g., 200 troops for six months or 1,200 troops for one month).[3] This person-year size threshold needs to be met in each year of the intervention, however. A deployment of ten troops for ten years would not qualify. To be included as a naval or air intervention, a sizable portion of the adversary's air and naval forces had to be involved, and we also included kinetic activity, such as air or naval strikes and air-to-air combat. We regard paramilitary and proxy forces as outside the scope of this report and consider only those interventions conducted by Iran's military.[4]

The size criterion gives a sense of the size and scope of activity of interest in this report, but the parameters should not be regarded as inflexible. Some operations of interest might include thousands of troops for a shorter duration, such as a few weeks or months, while others might involve a smaller formation engaged in combat for only a few days. Depending on the circumstances, both might qualify as military interventions.

The purpose of the requirement that the forces involved be engaged in a particular set of activities was to eliminate cases in which a state may forward-deploy forces as a convenient alternative to basing them at home but in which the forces were otherwise engaged in the same activities they would have been doing if stationed domestically and not substantially interacting with or affecting the host state or population. Activities that warrant inclusion as an intervention include foreign internal defense, combat, counterinsurgency, stability operations, humanitarian assistance, deterrence, security, intelligence and

---

[3] In some rare instances, force levels during a multiyear intervention might temporarily have fallen below this threshold for an isolated year (and then again risen above it); as a general rule of thumb, we would nonetheless code the intervention as a continuous mission. However, if there were long periods beneath this threshold, either after the withdrawal of major forces or in the run-up to the deployment of major forces, then the intervention would be broken up into different cases or we would otherwise exclude these years.

[4] In the Iranian case, the exclusions of proxy and small-scale intervention omits a large amount of activity. This is a limitation of this report, but it is an intentional one. We chose to focus here on Iran's use of its military. Iran's use of proxy forces is deserving of its own analysis and report.

reconnaissance, and lift. We provide additional detail and definitions of each activity type in Chapter Three.

In this report, we have chosen to forgo the discussion of proxies for several reasons. First, as we explain in the literature review, Iran's use of its own assets in military interventions has not received the same amount of attention as its use of proxies. Although several gaps still exist in the literature on Iranian nonstate partners, they deserve a separate treatment. Second, policymakers and military planners must understand when, where, why, and how Iran is most likely to intervene to formulate a coherent strategy to deter, contain, and counter the regime. Iranian forces and Iranian-backed nonstate actors present different sets of challenges, and the United States must develop specific responses to each. Third, nonstate partners and proxies cannot be considered as an integral part of the political and military establishments in Iran; these groups are not involved in the decisionmaking process, and they neither dictate the country's military strategy nor are they in charge of executing it. Instead, Iran-aligned and Iran-supported nonstate actors serve as an important tool in the regime's toolkit. Finally, we chose not to take proxies into account in this report for the sake of consistency across all the cases assessed in this series of reports (for example, our Russia and China reports also focus narrowly on those countries' armed forces).

These recent patterns in increased and more-aggressive Iranian military interventions heighten the importance of better understanding Tehran's strategic thinking. In particular, they raise the concern that Iran may gradually transition from conducting relatively low-cost and low-risk foreign operations (such as its intervention to fight ISIS in Iraq) to ones that carry a higher risk of direct, large-scale conflict with the United States (best illustrated by its intervention to support Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria). By identifying characteristics of past Iranian military interventions—including trends and drivers shaping the decision to intervene—this report aims to inform U.S. Department of Defense and U.S. Army strategic planning and force posture decisionmaking.

Research Questions

The following research questions have driven our research and framed our study of Iranian military interventions:

1. When, where, and how does Iran use military interventions?
2. What motivates Iran to intervene militarily in a foreign country? Under what circumstances—where, when, and how—is Tehran most likely to undertake a military intervention?
3. Under what circumstances might Iran deviate from its traditional model, and what might spark Iranian interventionism and revisionism to increase in the future?
4. Can we translate this analysis of historical drivers and trends into usable signposts to enable U.S. policymakers and military planners to better anticipate future Iranian military interventions?

This report makes two main contributions to existing work on Iranian military interventions. First, it presents a more comprehensive quantitative account of Iranian use of military forces outside its borders, including the size of forces deployed and the activities conducted. The data used for these analyses are distinct in their level of detail and scope. Second, the report combines qualitative and quantitative analyses to explore the key factors shaping Iranian intervention decisions and uses these analyses to propose signposts that may warn of future Iranian interventions and identify corresponding metrics that can be used to track risk over time.

Research Approach and Methodology

To identify and evaluate potential hypotheses to explain where, when, why, and whether Iran undertakes military interventions, we adopted a threefold research design that used mixed qualitative and quantitative methods. Our literature review provided a theoretical framework for factors affecting Iranian intervention decisionmaking, our quantitative analysis of historical cases added insight to support some of

these hypotheses, and our supplementary use of case studies provided contextual depth and allowed for a more detailed analysis of theorized drivers.

First, through academic literature reviews focused on foreign military interventions broadly and on Iranian interventions specifically, the research team preliminarily identified possible explanatory factors driving adversary intervention behavior, including indicators and warnings for more-aggressive and/or more risk-acceptant behavior. The research team then developed a taxonomy of ten potential factors affecting the likelihood of adversary military interventions generally. This framework included geopolitical, domestic, and ideational factors, including

- national status and prestige
- regional power balance and stability
- external threats
- alliance or partnership obligations and relations
- domestic politics and regime legitimacy
- economic interests
- co-identity group populations in the host country
- political and religious ideology
- enabling military capabilities.

Second, these hypotheses were further informed by insights gained from quantitative analysis of the post-1979 Iranian military interventions (whose methodology and findings we discuss in more detail in Chapter Three), collected using the definition discussed earlier. Perhaps surprisingly, these criteria yielded a case universe of fewer than ten instances of military intervention by Iran since 1979. Nonetheless, these data—which include information on each intervention's ground, air, and naval size; duration; primary activities; and political objectives—revealed some key patterns and suggested some possible predictors of Iranian use of its military outside its borders.

Finally, to complement and supplement these quantitative analyses, we conducted in-depth case studies to provide a better contextual understanding of Iranian behavior and decisions regarding certain

key military interventions. For this qualitative analysis, we selected two cases that provide variation on the key factors determining why and how—and possibly the comparative differences in where and when—Iranian forces are involved in interventions: Iran's intervention in the Syrian civil war (2011–present) and Iran's intervention to counter ISIS in Iraq (2014–present).

We selected these cases for several reasons. First, we decided to select ground interventions rather than purely air and naval interventions. Ground operations are Iran's strong suit and present the greatest challenge to the United States in general and the U.S. Army in particular. They are also better documented than Iranian air and naval operations, allowing for a more informed analysis. Second, these two case studies were selected because of their explanatory power. After eliminating air and naval cases, we were left with a handful of choices.

We did not use the Iran-Iraq War as a case study because the conflict is thoroughly documented and assessed in the existing scholarship and, short of a direct military conflict between the United States and Iran or a third-party invasion of Iran, it is unlikely to present a useful model for U.S. policymakers and military planners in considering the threat of future Iranian interventions. We also did not use the Lebanese Civil War as an example because it harbored many of the same characteristics as Iran's intervention in Iraq, but the latter was both more current and better documented, allowing us to provide a more useful example for U.S. policymakers and military planners.

Hence, we compared and contrasted two cases that share some similarities but whose differences shed light on Iran's toolbox pertaining to military interventions. That the two conflicts unfolded during more or less the same period with the same stated objective (although, in practice, the objectives varied greatly in the two countries) was also helpful in assessing the nuances of the Iranian military intervention model. The Iranian counter-ISIS operations in Iraq are illustrative of Tehran's military intervention model. Therefore, the case study sheds light on the Iranian way of war, which largely relies on advisory missions supporting local forces. The Iranian intervention in Syria departs from this model because it involved Iranian forces deployed in combat in addition to an advisory mission. Together, these cases provide a

nuanced overview of the Iranian playbook, how Iran has conducted military interventions since 1979, and how it might do so in the future.

Limitations and Caveats

Our analyses face several limitations. First, access to information about Iranian decisionmaking is limited and shrouded in secrecy. Second, even when military activity exceeds our size threshold, there is often much uncertainty about the size and activities because the Iranian regime is rarely transparent about what it is doing with its military forces. What reporting does exist may be incomplete, and existing analyses are often biased or agenda-driven. Open-source research on the topic suffers from key shortcomings. For example, the reporting on Iranian military activities is often opaque, with sources disagreeing on even the most basic facts, such as the general scope of involvement: In various theaters, some sources place the number of Iranian forces deployed in the low hundreds, while others estimate the size to be in the tens of thousands. These challenges make it difficult to provide an accurate and complete picture of Iranian military activities outside its borders.[5] The existing open-source literature on Iranian military interventions relies mostly on qualitative assessments of the country's involvement in wars. For example, several studies have discussed Iranian strategy, military operations, specific tactics, and overall battlefield effectiveness in general and during specific wars in particular.[6] None, however, conduct a thorough analysis of Iranian military interventions, including both combat and noncombat activities, in a systematic way. Our decision to use a 100 person-year threshold (for ground forces, with similar thresholds for air and naval activities) is in many ways an attempt to overcome these limitations, because we expect reporting on these larger activities to be somewhat easier to find

---

5 To overcome these challenges, we used reporting from multiple sources—Iranian official sources, unclassified U.S. government and military sources, and media reporting—and collected three sets of data: low, high, and best estimates of Iranian troop deployments.

6 Pierre Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War*, trans. Nicholas Elliott, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015; Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict*, London: Grafton, 1989; and Williamson Murray and Kevin Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

and perhaps less subject to bias or secrecy. However, even information about larger Iranian interventions is missing key details or provides details but with an agenda.

In addition to these limitations, there are gaps in the academic research on this topic, meaning that although we endeavor to bring in relevant literature and existing work, there is relatively little existing research to draw on in some cases. Iran's military affairs and security policies have generated much debate among scholars and practitioners. Researchers have produced several books and articles on the country's standing and influence in the Middle East and South Asia, the Iranian military organizational structure and force posture, and the regime's operations in various regional theaters. However, there is a dearth of comprehensive assessments of the theoretical model for Iranian military interventions and of rigorous and systematic discussions of Iran's military interventions since 1979 and the factors that may have driven and shaped them.

As our data demonstrate, Iranian ground interventions in the period under consideration have been limited to two key time frames: the duration of the Iran-Iraq War and the post-2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. Unsurprisingly, the Iran-Iraq War is fairly well documented.[7] With some prominent exceptions, the literature on Iran's military

---

[7] On the existing literature and factors most likely to affect Tehran's decisions to commit forces abroad during the Iran-Iraq War see, for instance, Richard N. Schofield, *Evolution of the Shatt al-'Arab Boundary Dispute*, Cambridgeshire, United Kingdom: Middle East and North African Studies Press, 1986; Efraim Karsh, "Geopolitical Determinism: The Origins of the Iran-Iraq War," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 44, No. 2, Spring 1980; Shirin Tahir-Kheli and Shaheen Ayubi, eds., *The Iran-Iraq War: New Weapons, Old Conflicts*, New York: Praeger, 1983; J.M. Abdulghani, *Iraq and Iran: The Years of Crisis*, Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984; Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War*, London: I.B. Tauris, 1988; Efraim Karsh, ed., *The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989; Stephen C. Pelletiere and Douglas V. Johnson II, *Lessons Learned: The Iran-Iraq War*, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 1991; Stephen C. Pelletiere, *The Iran-Iraq War: Chaos in a Vacuum*, New York: Praeger, 1992; Thomas L. McNaugher, "Ballistic Missiles and Chemical Weapons: The Legacy of the Iran-Iraq War," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 2, Fall 1990; Lawrence G. Potter and Gary Sick, eds., *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004; Ariane M. Tabatabai and Annie Tracy Samuel, "What the Iran-Iraq War Tells Us About the Future of the Iran Nuclear Deal," *International Security*, Vol. 42, No. 1, Summer

interventions until recently was mostly populated by accounts and analyses of Iran's involvement in this conflict. Several monographs and articles have outlined the causes and assessed the consequences and implications of the Iran-Iraq War and have analyzed the two countries' political objectives, military strategy, operations, tactics, and leadership perspectives on the war (although this final category remains less well-developed).[8] In addition to the scholarship published in the United States and elsewhere in the West, Iranians (both scholars and state-linked entities, such as the armed forces) have studied the conflict and produced dozens of articles and monographs on the topic.[9]

More recently, the post-2003 regional landscape in the Middle East (and Iran's place in it) has generated much scholarly debate around Tehran's involvement in several key theaters: specifically, Afghanistan (2001–present), Iraq (2003–present), Lebanon (1980s–present), Syria (2011–present), and Yemen (2014–present).[10] However, most of this lit-

---

2017; and Annie Tracy Samuel, *Perceptions and Narratives of Security: The Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps and the Iran-Iraq War*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, May 2012.

[8] Karsh, 1980; Tahir-Kheli and Ayubi,1983; Chubin and Tripp, 1988; Karsh, 1989; Pelletiere and Johnson, 1991; McNaugher, 1990; Potter and Sick, 2004; and Mohammad Ayatollai Tabaar, "Factional Politics in the Iran-Iraq War," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 3–4, 2019.

[9] Several series of books outline the chronology of events as viewed and experienced by Iran, as well as the details of various campaigns throughout the war and the rationale for certain operational and strategic decisions. Several collections of oral history and the memoirs of decisionmakers in the context of the war more broadly have also appeared in Iran in recent years and continue to be published. These series include a collection of analytical monographs, titled *Tarikh-e tahlili-e jang-e Iran va Iraq*, published in Tehran by the Sacred Defense Documents and Research Center (Markaz-e asnad va tahqiqat-e defa-e moqaddas); the oral history collection, aiming to document the views of key commanders and decisionmakers during the war, *Tarikh-e shafahi-e defa-e moqaddas*, similarly published in Tehran by the Sacred Defense Documents and Research Center; and several series and individual publications on the military operations of the war, including *Atlas-e jang-e Iran va Iraq*, published by the same organization.

[10] Mohsen Milani, "Iran's Policy Toward Afghanistan," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 2, Spring 2006; Alireza Nader, Ali G. Scotten, Ahmad Rahmani, Robert Stewart, and Leila Mahnad, *Iran's Influence in Afghanistan: Implications for the U.S. Drawdown*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-616, 2014; U.S. Army, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War:* Vol. I, *Invasions, Insurgency, Civil War 2003–2006*, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: U.S. Army War

erature focuses on Iranian efforts specific to these countries; virtually none places them in the context of broader Iranian interventions and how they might contribute to a conceptual model of Iranian military interventions. Moreover, to the extent that Iranian state involvement in these post-9/11 conflicts has received scholarly treatment, these analytical pieces have largely focused on the role of Tehran's clandestine paramilitary wing, the Quds Force. In short, the scholarship on Iranian nonproxy, conventional activities in these conflicts remains fairly thin, in part because of the lack of open-source material on the topic and partly because these conflicts are ongoing, making it more difficult to fully capture the breadth, depth, and implications of Iranian involvement.

This is not to say that post-2003 Iranian military activities are totally missing from past research, but what does exist refers most frequently to Iran's activities beyond its borders by amalgamating Iranian forces and the Iranian Threat Network—the network of Iranian nonstate partners and proxies. These proxy activities constitute most of Tehran's regional efforts.[11] As the literature suggests and our analy-

College Press, 2019a; U.S. Army, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War:* Vol. II, *Surge and Withdrawal 2007–2011*, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: U.S. Army War College Press, 2019b; Alireza Nader, *Iran's Role in Iraq: Room For Cooperation?* Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-151-OSD, 2015; Thomas Juneau, "Iran's Costly Intervention in Syria: A Pyrrhic Victory," *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 2020; Ali Alfoneh, "Between Reform and Revolution: Sheikh Qassim, the Bahraini Shi'a, and Iran," American Enterprise Institute, Middle Eastern Outlook No. 4, July 2012; Dina Esfandiary and Ariane Tabatabai, "Yemen: An Opportunity for Iran-Saudi Dialogue?" *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 2, 2016; and Thomas Juneau, "Iran's Policy Towards the Houthis in Yemen: A Limited Return on a Modest Investment," *International Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 3, May 2016.

[11] On Tehran's patron-client relationships with nonstate actors and proxy groups, see, for instance, Afshon Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran's Way of War," *Security Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2019; Melissa G. Dalton, "How Iran's Hybrid-War Tactics Help and Hurt It," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 73, No. 5, 2017; Michael Eisenstadt, *Iranian Military Power: Capabilities and Intentions*, Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1996; Seth G. Jones, "War by Proxy: Iran's Growing Footprint in the Middle East," Washington, D.C., Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2019; Ali Soufan, "Qassem Soleimani and Iran's Unique Regional Strategy," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 11, No. 10, November 2018; Brian Katz, "Axis Rising: Iran's Evolving Regional Strategy and Non-State Partnerships in the Middle East," Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 2018; Colin Clarke and Phillip Smyth, "The Implications of

sis confirms, Iran has historically mostly intervened in the region via proxies and has seldom committed its troops beyond its borders—even less so in a combat capacity. Hence, much of the literature on Iranian involvement outside its borders, and the conflicts in which it has engaged, is focused on the patron-client relationships cultivated by Tehran with various nonstate actors, with less focus on Iran's interventions themselves.[12] This is the gap that we aim to fill with this report. We focus explicitly on the activities of Iran's military forces and do not include proxy activities. On the one hand, this excludes much of Iran's military activity. On the other, it allows us to fill a gap in existing scholarship on Iranian use of military forces abroad.

Finally, we endeavor to identify those factors that contribute to decisions to deploy military forces abroad, but in no case are we able to identify factors that definitively predict such interventions. In other words, our findings identify associations and correlations but not causation. Future work that is able to build a larger data set of noninterventions might be able to untangle these relationships further, though the small number of Iranian military interventions may continue to pose challenges.[13]

Report Organization

The remainder of this report is organized as follows. In Chapter Two, we analyze the existing literature to identify hypotheses on factors that have driven Iran to deploy military forces abroad since 1979. In Chapter Three, we provide the results of our comprehensive quantitative analysis of all Iranian military interventions abroad over this period;

Iran's Expanding Shi`a Foreign Fighter Network, *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 10, No. 10, November 2017; and Soufan Center, *Iran's Playbook: Deconstructing Tehran's Regional Strategy*, New York, May 2019.

[12] Soufan, 2018, p. 1.

[13] We do not build such a nonintervention database here for several reasons, including the difficulty of identifying noninterventions for any country (especially one for which information is so limited) and resource constraints on the project, but such an effort would be a useful endeavor for future research.

these data provide some plausible evidence to support some of the possible explanations identified in the previous chapter. Next, we present our case studies: We examine the Iranian intervention in the Syrian civil war (2011–present) in Chapter Four and analyze the Iranian counter-ISIS campaign in Iraq (2014–present) in Chapter Five. We begin both chapters by surveying the events that have shaped each conflict and the timeline of Iranian efforts there, then we assess the main factors leading to Iran's intervention. Finally, we conclude the report in Chapter Six by summarizing our findings, identifying potential signposts of Iranian military interventions, and exploring the implications of this research for U.S. Department of Defense and U.S. Army leaders and strategic planners.

CHAPTER TWO

Identifying Possible Drivers of Iranian Military Interventions

In this chapter, we first briefly review the existing literature on why states intervene militarily outside their borders to develop a framework of key intervention drivers. The first half of this chapter provides a slightly modified version of the literature review and framework discussion in Chapter Two of the first report in this series, *Anticipating Adversary Military Interventions*.[1] We use this framework and a review of literature focused on drivers of Iranian military interventions since 1979 to identify factors that past research suggests are the most likely to influence Tehran's decisions to deploy forces abroad. We then synthesize these findings into a qualitative assessment of the relevance of each potential factor in the Iranian experience of military interventionism. In so doing, we establish a theoretical framework for potential drivers of Iranian military intervention, which we apply to our quantitative and case study analyses in Chapters Three through Five.

Theoretical Drivers of Military Interventions

To identify potential factors that may have influenced Iranian interventions, we need a generalized framework of factors that are likely to influence intervention decisions across states. To develop this frame-

[1] Jennifer Kavanagh, Bryan Frederick, Nathan Chandler, Samuel Charap, Timothy Heath, Ariane Tabatabai, Edward Geist, and Christian Curriden, *Anticipating Adversary Military Interventions*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A444-1, 2021.

work, we conducted a review of past research on the drivers of third-party intervention for all states. This literature underscores that interventions are more likely to occur when the intervening state sees a better chance of achieving its key objectives or pursuing its key interests by intervening than by remaining on the sidelines. Our review identified ten factors across four main categories that past work has identified as relevant to this calculation and that capture the main reasons that states have initiated military interventions. These factors are presented in Table 2.1. In addition to defining the key factors and what we know about them, we seek to identify metrics that can be used to measure or assess these different factors and to clarify the definition of each factor. These potential metrics will be discussed again when we highlight signposts of future interventions in Chapter Six.[2]

Geopolitical Factors

The first set of key intervention drivers is geopolitical. Geopolitical factors are any that relate to the international system or relationships between countries that can drive the decision to intervene at a more macro level.

External Threat to Sovereignty

The logic for why external threats to sovereignty may drive states to initiate a military intervention is straightforward: States that perceive a direct threat to their sovereignty, their citizens, their territory, or their resources states might choose to deploy forces abroad to counter or

---

[2] Importantly, the ten factors identified here are ones that appear to contribute to intervention decisions by third-party states according to a review of existing qualitative and quantitative research, but they do not guarantee an intervention. State decisionmaking on the use of military forces is complex, and single factors in isolation are rarely sufficient to guarantee a particular intervention decision. Instead, these factors should be viewed as potentially increasing or decreasing the risk of an intervention. As an example, the existence of a partnership between two states might encourage one to intervene to defend the other, but it does not necessitate such an intervention. The state could still choose to abstain from intervening, assessing that other factors outweigh its commitment to the partnership, though the partnership makes the intervention more likely than it would otherwise have been.

Table 2.1
Drivers of Third-Party Interventions

Category	Factors Affecting the Likelihood of Adversary Military Interventions
Geopolitics	External threat to sovereignty
	Regional power balance
	Alliance or partnership with host
	National status
Domestic	Domestic politics and legitimacy
	Co-identity group populations in host
	Economic interests
Ideational	Leadership and personality
	Ideology
Enablers	Capabilities

reduce that threat.[3] We include only actual or threatened infringements on sovereignty, actual or threatened territorial claims, or direct and immediate threats to regime security as part of this factor. The clearest indicators of this factor are relatively straightforward: the existence or threat of an armed attack, the existence of a territorial claim or challenge to the territorial integrity of the intervening nation, the perception or fear of such a claim at some point in the future, or the threat or fear of a forced regime change. Past research suggests that the risk of conflict between two neighboring states is significantly higher where there is a dispute about the location of a shared border or when one state has made a claim to territory the other also believes it owns. In such instances, states might launch an intervention to defend or reclaim disputed territory.[4] Interventions might also respond to a direct attack on a nation's homeland or even the threat of such an attack.

3 Hans J. Morgenthau, "To Intervene or Not to Intervene," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 45, No. 3, April 1967.

4 Stephen A. Kocs, "Territorial Disputes and Interstate War, 1945–1987," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 57, No. 1, February 1995.

Even potential, as yet unrealized, threats can trigger interventions by states seeking to protect their interests or forestall the development and emergence of new threats. RAND research has shown, for instance, that U.S. decisions to initiate a deterrent intervention (and even the number of forces deployed for such a mission) are directly linked to the severity of the perceived threat.[5]

Alliances and Partnerships

The second geopolitical factor shown to drive intervention decisions has to do with relationships between countries. States will often intervene to protect or support allies and partners. Past research is clear that the existence of an alliance or partnership is one of the strongest factors shaping intervention decisions.[6] This relationship seems obvious in the case of treaty allies who have made a commitment to defend each other, but it is also true for countries with other types of partnerships, even informal. Relevant partnerships, then, may be identified by looking first at states with formal treaties and agreements (both defense-oriented and otherwise) and then looking at states with other types of close partnerships, developed through, for example, military or economic aid or past instances of cooperation. Countries may be more likely to intervene to protect allies and partners for many reasons. The most obvious reason is in response to a shared external threat or adversary (e.g., an intervention by a rival power, an internal guerilla movement), but the decision to intervene can also be driven by a set of shared interests or goals, historical ties, or the explicit terms of the alliance.[7] Finally, states may intervene not only to protect an ally but also to support an ally that is intervening elsewhere. Research suggests that

---

5 Jennifer Kavanagh, Bryan Frederick, Matthew Povlock, Stacie L. Pettyjohn, Angela O'Mahony, Stephen Watts, Nathan Chandler, John Speed Meyers, and Eugeniu Hau, *The Past, Present, and Future of U.S. Ground Interventions: Identifying Trends, Characteristics, and Signposts*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1831-A, 2017.

6 Kavanagh et al., 2017; Michael G. Findley and Tze Kwang Teo, "Rethinking Third-Party Interventions into Civil Wars: An Actor-Centric Approach," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 68, No. 4, November 2006; and Mi Yung Yoon, "Explaining US Intervention in Third World Internal Wars, 1945–1989," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 4, August 1997.

7 Yoon, 1997; Findley and Teo, 2006.

such interventions may be more common when there are divergences in the interests and objectives of intervening powers, since this gives each state a greater and more enduring incentive to participate in order to influence the outcome.[8] However, alliances and (especially) partnerships do not guarantee an intervention. There are numerous examples of states violating established partnerships in favor of other interests or choosing one partner over another.

Regional Balance of Power

States may also intervene in an ongoing crisis or conflict to ensure a favorable balance of power in the region where they are intervening or in regard to the international system, whether this means maintaining the current balance of power or creating a balance of power that is more immediately favorable.[9] Past research demonstrates that states do consider possible intervention by rivals when deciding to intervene.[10] More generally, past research suggests that states may use intervention to protect the integrity of their sphere of influence and to head off any threats to the existing international balance of power from a major adversary or a regional challenger.[11] Similarly, states may use intervention to maintain the balance of power within a specific region. This may include efforts to shore up weak states, reduce instability that is affecting the balance power, or prevent regime or policy changes that would alter regional partnerships or allegiances.[12]

---

8 Findley and Teo, 2006.

9 Stephen E. Gent, "External Threats and Military Intervention: The United States and the Caribbean Basin," *Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2010.

10 Yoon, 1997.

11 Gent, 2010; Yoon, 1997; Mark P. Lagon, "The International System and the Reagan Doctrine: Can Realism Explain Aid to 'Freedom Fighters'?" *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 22, No. 1, January 1992.

12 Dursun Peksen and Marie Olson Lounsbery, "Beyond the Target State: Foreign Military Intervention and Neighboring State Stability," *International Interactions*, Vol. 38, No. 3, 2012; Jacob D. Kathman, "Civil War Diffusion and Regional Motivations for Intervention," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 55, No. 6, 2011; and Roy Allison, "The Russian Case for Military Intervention in Georgia: International Law, Norms and Political Calculation," *European Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2009.

The *regional balance of power* factor is related to the *external threat to sovereignty* factor, but the two are distinct. Certainly, a threat to one state's sovereignty by another state in the region has the potential to challenge the regional balance of power. However, shifts in the regional balance of power occur even more often in the absence of direct threats or territorial claims. Anything from the expanding economic influence of an adversary, to civil war in a neighbor, to the development of new military technologies could shift the regional balance of power in ways that have the potential to trigger some sort of military intervention.

Shifts in the regional balance of power can be hard to measure objectively. The National Military Capabilities index is one possible metric that can be used to study changes in balance of power. An index of relative economic size is another option, among others. RAND researchers have also developed a metric useful for studying changes in the balance of power regionally.[13]

National Status

The fourth geopolitical rationale for intervention is national status. States may use interventions to underscore their capabilities, as a statement of national power or of military strength. Although again related to other geopolitical factors, national status is also distinct. National status is largely about reputation. States may use interventions to maintain or build their reputations. National status can drive an intervention even when there is no threat and no change in the balance of power. States concerned with national status may use interventions to demonstrate military strength or relevance or their relative place or rank in either the global or the regional order.[14] States may intervene to exercise their abilities to influence policy outcomes: in other words,

---

[13] Stephen Watts, Bryan Frederick, Jennifer Kavanagh, Angela O'Mahony, Thomas S. Szayna, Matthew Lane, Alexander Stephenson, and Colin P. Clarke, *A More Peaceful World? Regional Conflict Trends and U.S. Defense Planning*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1177-A, 2017.

[14] Karen A. Feste, *Expanding the Frontiers: Superpower Intervention in the Cold War*, New York: Praeger, 1992; Timothy R. Heath, "Developments in China's Military Force Projection and Expeditionary Capabilities," testimony presented before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission on January 21, 2016, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, CT-450, 2016; Michael J. Mazarr, Timothy R. Heath, and Astrid Stuth

to get a seat at the table.[15] States may intervene to protect interests and assets that are core to their national status, or at least to their perception of their national status.[16] Even participation in multinational humanitarian or other interventions may be influenced by pursuit of national status. Specifically, states may see their ability to participate in international operations as a sign of relevance on the international stage. [17]

Domestic Factors

States may also be motivated to intervene due to internal drivers: political, economic, or sociocultural factors that make interventions advantageous or desirable. There is some work that finds that the impact of domestic factors overwhelms that of geopolitical factors when explaining why states intervene.[18]

Politics and Legitimacy

The most commonly proposed domestic drivers of interventions are those having to do with domestic politics and legitimacy. According to this family of arguments, political leaders might use interventions and their timing for political purposes, to build support among their constituency, or to enhance their domestic political legitimacy. The "diversionary theory of war" suggests that leaders might use interventions to increase their chances of reelection, distract from economic or other

---

Cevallos, *China and the International Order*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2423-OSD, 2018; Lagon, 1992.

15 Dmitri Trenin, "Russia in the Middle East: Moscow's Objectives, Priorities, and Policy Drivers," New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Task Force on U.S. Policy Toward Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia, 2016; Lagon, 1992; Findley and Teo, 2006.

16 Trenin, 2016.

17 Justin Massie and Benjamin Zyla, "Alliance Value and Status Enhancement: Canada's Disproportionate Military Burden Sharing in Afghanistan," *Politics and Policy*, Vol. 46, No. 2, April 2018.

18 Patrick James and John R. Oneal, "The Influence of Domestic and International Politics on the President's Use of Force," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 35, No. 2, June 1991; Charles W. Ostrom and Brian L. Job, "The President and the Political Use of Force," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 80, No. 2, June 1986.

problems at home, or shore up their support through a "rally around the flag" effect. Although these explanations are appealing in theory and seem to describe some individual cases fairly well, they have mixed empirical support.[19] Some research suggests that leaders can successfully use intervention to bolster their chances for reelection, but this relationship seems to exist under a narrow set of circumstances. Where it does work, intervention seems to allow leaders who launch successful interventions to rebuild their popular support. Losing interventions, however, can end political careers.[20] Empirical work is clear that although rally effects can occur following a new intervention, those effects are not guaranteed and are smaller and more short-lived than many might expect.[21]

Aside from using interventions to win elections, leaders might use interventions to shape their public image (e.g., to demonstrate their toughness in the face of the adversary, which could increase political support in some contexts).[22] Or leaders might base their intervention decisions on public support, intervening when public support is high

---

[19] Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Alastair Smith, Randolph M. Siverson, and James D. Morrow, *The Logic of Political Survival*, paperback ed., Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005; Amber Aubone, "Explaining US Unilateral Military Intervention in Civil Conflicts: A Review of the Literature," *International Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 2, 2013; Brett Ashley Leeds and David R. Davis, "Domestic Political Vulnerability and International Disputes," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 6, December 1997.

[20] Karl R. DeRouen, Jr., and Jeffrey Peake, "The Dynamics of Diversion: The Domestic Implications of Presidential Use of Force," *International Interactions*, Vol. 28, No. 2, 2002; Kyle Haynes, "Diversionary Conflict: Demonizing Enemies or Demonstrating Competence?" *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 34, No. 4, 2017; Stephen E. Gent, "Scapegoating Strategically: Reselection, Strategic Interaction, and the Diversionary Theory of War," *International Interactions*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 2009; Ostrom and Job, 1986; Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2005.

[21] Aubone, 2013; Tim Groeling and Matthew A. Baum, "Crossing the Water's Edge: Elite Rhetoric, Media Coverage, and the Rally-Round-the-Flag Phenomenon," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 70, No. 4, October 2008.

[22] James Meernik, "Domestic Politics and the Political Use of Military Force by the United States," *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 4, December 2001.

(typically, when the stakes are high and perceived costs are low) and not when the public does not support the intervention.[23]

There is also a body of work focused on the role played by the institutional characteristics of the domestic polity: the political party of the leader, the regime type, the timing of elections, and even the type of democracy. Empirical evidence on the relevance of these factors is mixed. First, the type of democracy and, specifically, the decision-making process used by a country's leaders to make intervention decisions can have an effect on whether the intervention occurs. Parliamentary and presidential democracies, for example, may be differentially influenced by domestic politics, because the constraints placed on the executive are different in each context.[24] The relevance of regime type extends even to authoritarian leaders, who may be accountable to their inner core of supporters for continued loyalty but who have much greater flexibility when launching interventions and may have different priorities when weighing the costs and benefits of an intervention deci-

[23] There is also an extensive body of literature on the topic of what drives public support for military operations and interventions. Past research has identified (1) what is at stake, (2) the expressed consensus of elites, and (3) the perceived costs as key variables. Some work also suggests that public support may also be influenced by media coverage. See, for example, Eric V. Larson and Bogdan Savych, *American Public Support for U.S. Military Operations from Mogadishu to Baghdad*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-231-A, 2005; Adam J. Berinsky, "Assuming the Costs of War: Events, Elites, and American Public Support for Military Conflict," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 69, No. 4, November 2007; Louis Klarevas, "The 'Essential Domino' of Military Operations: American Public Opinion and the Use of Force," *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 3, No. 4, November 2002; and James Golby, Peter Feaver, and Kyle Dropp, "Elite Military Cues and Public Opinion About the Use of Military Force," *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol. 44, No. 1, 2018.

[24] Juliet Kaarbo, "Prime Minister Leadership Style and the Role of Parliament in Security Policy," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2018; and Wolfgang Wagner, "Is There a Parliamentary Peace? Parliamentary Veto Power and Military Interventions from Kosovo to Daesh," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2018.

sion.[25] Evidence for a relationship between interventions and the executive political party or other related institutional factors seems weaker.[26]

Finally, there are arguments about bureaucratic politics and the role it can play in driving states into interventions. These arguments suggest that government decisions, including those to intervene militarily, are the result of processes and interactions that occur within the government and of negotiations and trades made by government actors.[27]

Co-Identity Populations

Past research also suggests that countries may be more likely to intervene to protect coethnic or coreligious group populations living elsewhere.[28] The rationale for this seems straightforward: States are motivated to protect those with whom they share common cultural and other ties. Existing research consistently finds that a strong transnational link across kinship groups can increase the risk of conflict and military intervention, as well as the intensity of that conflict or intervention.[29] This effect can be significant. For some states, particularly those with high ethnic fractionalization and a dominant ethnic group, ethnic kinship is one of the most significant and determina-

---

[25] Jessica L. Weeks, "Strongmen and Straw Men: Authoritarian Regimes and the Initiation of International Conflict," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 106, No. 2, May 2012; Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2005.

[26] Michael T. Koch and Patricia Sullivan, "Should I Stay or Should I Go Now? Partisanship, Approval, and the Duration of Major Power Democratic Military Interventions," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 72, No. 3, July 2010; Meernik, 2001.

[27] Graham T. Allison and Morton H. Halperin, "Bureaucratic Politics: A Paradigm and Some Policy Implications," *World Politics*, Vol. 24, Supp. 1, Spring 1972.

[28] David Carment and Patrick James, "Third-Party States in Ethnic Conflict: Identifying the Domestic Determinants of Intervention," in Steven E. Lobell and Philip Mauceri, eds., *Ethnic Conflict and International Politics: Explaining Diffusion and Escalation*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

[29] Lars-Erik Cederman, Luc Girardin, and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, "Ethnonationalist Triads: Assessing the Influence of Kin Groups on Civil Wars," *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 3, June 2009; and Mehmet Gurses, "Transnational Ethnic Kin and Civil War Outcomes," *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 68, No. 1, 2015.

tive factors driving intervention decisions.[30] The influence of ethnic and religious ties in explaining intervention decisions extends across types of interventions. Existing work finds that ethnic and religious kinship networks can shape the decision to intervene in civil wars and can influence the side on which the intervening state aligns itself.[31] Other research explores the willingness of states to take on peacekeeping interventions on their own (outside a multilateral framework) and finds that ethnic ties are one of the most influential factors.[32] Research also underscores that religious ties can be as influential as ethnic ones in shaping intervention decisions.[33] The mechanism for this relationship appears to operate both through ties between elite in the intervening and host states and through public pressure in the intervening state. The most straightforward way to operationalize this factor would be to consider the percentage of various coethnic or coreligious group members in various target countries. In regard to the United States, this might mean considering the percentage of U.S. citizens who come from or have relatives in a given country, the argument being that the United States could be more likely to intervene in states from which there is a larger diaspora in the United States.

Economic Interests

The final domestic consideration focuses on economic interests. We consider economic interests as a domestic consideration because a state's economic pursuits, even those outside its borders, will advance its domestic economy. There are several possible ways in which economic interests could factor into state intervention decisionmaking.

---

30 Ada Huibregtse, "External Intervention in Ethnic Conflict," *International Interactions*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2010.

31 Martin Austvoll Nome, "Transnational Ethnic Ties and Military Intervention: Taking Sides in Civil Conflicts in Europe, Asia and North Africa, 1944–99," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 19, No. 4, 2013.

32 Nicolas Rost and J. Michael Greig, "Taking Matters into Their Own Hands: An Analysis of the Determinants of State-Conducted Peacekeeping in Civil Wars," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 48, No. 2, 2011.

33 Joshua Su-Ya Wu and Austin J. Knuppe, "My Brother's Keeper? Religious Cues and Support for Foreign Military Intervention," *Politics and Religion*, Vol. 9, No. 3, September 2016.

First, states might use military interventions to protect their economic interests, especially when access to resources or national property overseas is threatened.[34] Second, states might intervene to secure new economic assets or access, including access to natural resources, ports, or markets. Some research has found that economic gain (specifically, in the form of access to oil reserves) can be a strong motivation for interventions, particularly for states with high demand for oil.[35] Related work finds a similar relationship for other lootable natural resources.[36] Other research asserts that access to ports and markets can be similarly powerful motivators.[37] Importantly, however, there is research on the opposite side of this argument that finds little or no relationship between economic gain and intervention decisions. RAND researchers in 2017 did not find access to oil markets as a significant predictor of U.S. intervention decisions, for example.[38] Third, domestic leaders might seek to use interventions abroad explicitly to boost economic growth. Specifically, states might launch interventions to spur their domestic manufacturing or other industries, using military intervention as a sort of economic stimulus aimed at increasing public approval or the popularity of the executive.[39] The economic basis for this strategy is weak, however. There is some empirical evidence that military

[34] Benjamin O. Fordham, "Power or Plenty? Economic Interests, Security Concerns, and American Intervention," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 4, December 2008; Yoon, 1997.

[35] Vincenzo Bove, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Petros G. Sekeris, "'Oil Above Water': Economic Interdependence and Third-Party Intervention," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 60, No. 7, 2016.

[36] Michael G. Findley and Josiah F. Marineau, "Lootable Resources and Third-Party Intervention into Civil Wars," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 32, No. 5, 2015.

[37] Fordham, 2008; Trenin, 2016.

[38] Kavanagh, Frederick, Povlock, et al., 2017; also see Frederic S. Pearson and Robert Baumann, "Foreign Military Intervention and Changes in United States Business Activity," *Journal of Political and Military Sociology*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1977; and Karl R. DeRouen, Jr., "The Indirect Link: Politics, the Economy, and the Use of Force," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 39, No. 4, December 1995.

[39] This final motivation bleeds into the domestic arena, but we keep it in this section so as not to split up economic interests in many places.

intervention can help certain industries, but it is often hard to attribute any economic gains to the intervention per se.[40] Finally, it worth noting that the relative importance of domestic economic factors in intervention decisions has consistently been shown to be less than that of domestic political or strategic drivers.[41]

Although interventions can bring economic gains, they can also have significant economic costs, not the least of which is the potential for serious disruptions to international trade or loss of access to international markets, either because of trade restrictions or other disruptions to supply chains and economic integration. When making decisions about whether to intervene, states are likely to weigh the possible economic gains from access to new markets and resources against possible losses from such disruptions. In other words, economic interests can serve as an inducement to interventions, but they can also serve to limit or prevent an intervention, depending on the context.

There are several potential ways to measure economic interests as they relate to intervention decisions. First, one can look specifically at access to key strategic resources, such as warm water ports, oil, or other key resources. Second, one can use measures of economic growth and trade, especially over time, to understand how economic resources may relate to intervention decisionmaking. Notably, we distinguish between economic interests as defined here and such factors as regional power balance. Although changes in economic fortunes can shift the international balance of power, such an interpretation considers economics as one factor among many and in relative terms. Here, we focus specifically on a state's economic condition and opportunities, apart from those of other states.

Ideational Factors

The third category of factors that emerged from our review is ideational factors: factors that emerge not from politics or economics, but from ideas, personality, and other more-abstract, intangible factors.

---

40 Pearson and Baumann, 1977.

41 Yoon, 1997; DeRouen, 1995; Fordham, 2008.

Ideology

Ideology may also shape or determine intervention decisions, with states intervening to uphold or advance (or counter) a set of principles, beliefs, or norms. In the U.S. context, the most commonly cited ideological driver of military intervention is that of democracy promotion. The United States has used the cause of democracy as the rationale for intervention since its earliest days and as recently as the 2003 intervention in Iraq. Although democracy seems to be a relevant ideological driver of intervention, evidence that authoritarianism serves a similar purpose is more mixed.[42] Humanitarian interventions may similarly be driven by ideological factors: specifically, the emerging norm of the "responsibility to protect." Evans, Thakur, and Pape describe responsibility to protect as "the normative instrument of choice for converting shocked international conscience about mass atrocity crimes into decisive collective action."[43] In other words, the concept serves as an ideological driver of humanitarian interventions that is not transactional or political.[44] For non-Western states, ideology may serve to favor restraint rather than interventions.

Literature on third-party intervention also identifies efforts to *counter* specific ideologies (e.g., Communism, jihadism) as strong motivators for intervention. Some past research finds that preventing the spread of communism during the Cold War years was, perhaps, the most significant and consistent driver of U.S. military interventions. For U.S. interventions in developing countries, for instance, one of the strongest drivers of intervention was whether the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was involved and whether there was a risk of communist victory.[45] Since 9/11, countering transnational terrorism has

---

[42] Lucan A. Way, "The Limits of Autocracy Promotion: The Case of Russia in the 'Near Abroad,'" *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 54, No. 4, November 2015.

[43] Gareth Evans, Ramesh Thakur, and Robert A. Pape, "Correspondence: Humanitarian Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect," *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 4, Spring 2013.

[44] Charles E. Ziegler, "Contesting the Responsibility to Protect," *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 17, No. 1, February 2016.

[45] Yoon, 1997.

similarly provided an ideological motivation for interventions by the United States and others.[46]

Nationalism is a final relevant ideology that may drive interventions. Here, we consider nationalism as an ideology focused on the creation of a nation-state and a national myth. In comparison to the national status factor, nationalism as defined here is inwardly focused, rather than focused on national position on the international stage. Van Evera argues that when a state believes that portions of its diaspora or pieces of territory that are rightly part of an imagined "homeland" exist outside the state's borders, the state might choose to use military force to work toward that homeland.[47] In other words, "unattained nationalisms" may drive conflict as a state seeks to unify its territory and build its national narrative. This may be especially true if the land or diaspora to which the state lays claim is contiguous to the state's borders and is homogeneous in nature.[48]

It is, of course, worth noting that ideological motivations often can be used as covers for a country's true intentions. For example, some Cold War interventions (e.g., intervention in the Dominican Republic) executed in the name of efforts to counter communism were often actually undertaken for more self-interested reasons.[49]

Leader Personality

In addition to ideology, the personality of the leader making the intervention decisions has also been shown in past research to shape a state's intervention behavior.[50] Most theories that focus on the role played by individual leaders start from the premise that leaders generally act in

---

[46] Tim Dunne, "Liberalism, International Terrorism, and Democratic Wars," *International Relations*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 2009.

[47] Stephen Van Evera, "Hypotheses on Nationalism and War," *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 4, Spring 1994.

[48] Van Evera, 1994; Barry R. Posen, "Nationalism, the Mass Army, and Military Power," *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Fall 1993.

[49] Kavanagh, Frederick, Povlock, et al., 2017.

[50] Elizabeth N. Saunders, *Leaders at War: How Presidents Shape Military Interventions*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011.

self-interested ways to retain power when faced with domestic or international challenges to their regimes. However, even given this baseline, different leaders may have different tolerances for risk, different attitudes toward the use of force as a political tool, and general preferences about involvement in conflict.[51] One set of arguments focuses on the aggressiveness of a leader's posture toward other states. In the U.S. case, Meernik argues that a president's reputation for aggressive use of force in the past is a strong predictor of that president's willingness to intervene in the future. Under this argument, the decisions that leaders make about use of force are generally consistent and even influenced by their past behavior or reputation for use of force.[52]

Saunders offers a more nuanced perspective on the role of personality, arguing that leaders across countries and political systems develop worldviews that are either internally oriented (focused on domestic threats and outcomes at home and in other states) or externally focused (emphasizing international outcomes and threats) prior to assuming office. This worldview then influences each leader's cost-benefit calculations and decisions about when to use force and when to exercise restraint. Leaders, under this view, differ in the types of crises and events that they will respond to rather than in their fundamental propensity to intervene.[53] Leader personality may also affect a leader's decisionmaking process in ways that affect intervention outcomes. Past research has indicated that leaders differ in how much they involve advisers, parliamentary bodies, and other experts in foreign policy decisions and that their approach to the decisionmaking process can affect the outcomes of those decisions.[54]

---

[51] Michael C. Horowitz and Matthew Fuhrmann, "Studying Leaders and Military Conflict: Conceptual Framework and Research Agenda," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 62, No. 10, 2018; and Ulrich Pilster, Tobias Böhmelt, and Atsushi Tago, "Political Leadership Changes and the Withdrawal from Military Coalition Operations, 1946–2001," *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 16, No. 4, November 2015.

[52] James Meernik, "Presidential Decision Making and the Political Use of Military Force," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 1, March 1994.

[53] Elizabeth N. Saunders, "Transformative Choices: Leaders and the Origins of Intervention Strategy," *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 2, Fall 2009.

[54] Kaarbo, 2018.

A final set of arguments considers the role of the leader's background and personal experience. This work suggests that that a leader's life experience prior to their position of political power is likely to shape their subsequent decisions about the use of force. For instance, a 2014 study found that leaders with prior military experience but no combat experience or those who have been members of rebel groups are most likely to initiate new wars and interventions. The authors suggest it is the leader's past experience with use of force that guides their decisions about future military action.[55]

Enablers: Capabilities

The final factor that emerged from our literature review did not have to do with state motivations at all, but instead focused on capabilities, primarily military and economic resources that allow a state to successfully launch and sustain a military intervention. Here, we refer to capabilities as *enablers*, meaning that they are resources that enable or allow a state to successfully launch a military intervention. Without sufficient economic resources to fund an intervention and to support the defense-related costs, and without the needed military technology and capabilities, states will not be able to undertake interventions they might otherwise prefer to. In particular, we focus on changes in capabilities: new economic resources or new military capabilities that may encourage states to launch interventions that they would not have otherwise. As with many of the individual motivations discussed earlier, such enablers are unlikely to drive an intervention decision on their own. For example, a state is not likely to decide to intervene simply because they have the economic or military capacity. A state would also likely need a motivation, such as those discussed earlier. However, given persistent motivations to intervene, changes in enabling capabilities can help to explain why a state intervenes at one point in time and not in another.

---

55 Michael C. Horowitz and Allan C. Stam, "How Prior Military Experience Influences the Future Militarized Behavior of Leaders," *International Organization*, Vol. 68, No. 3, Summer 2014.

Military and economic capabilities might shape intervention decisions in a few key ways. First, military capabilities might shape intervention feasibility. A state might have the desire to intervene but ultimately decide not to do so because it lacks the military capabilities or the economic resources required to launch the intervention or because decisionmakers assess that they do not have the military or economic capability to achieve desired objectives.[56] Second, past research suggests that, for the most part, states only pursue interventions where they expect to be able to achieve the desired outcome at a reasonable cost. This understanding of military interventions as based, in part, on military and economic capabilities is consistent with realist arguments that focus first on military power and state self-interest.[57] However, it is worth noting that states might choose to intervene even in cases in which they are overmatched and unprepared if other factors (such as those described earlier) demand such an intervention and overwhelm concerns about possible constraints.

In terms of metrics used to assess these capabilities, there are many options. One approach would be to focus on changes in capabilities. Significant increases or decreases in economic resources or military technology could be identified and recorded as a marker of states that might suddenly be more able to conduct military interventions than in the past. Another approach would be to focus on absolutes. For example, military spending, military size, gross domestic product per capita, or variables that denote possession of key technologies (e.g., nuclear weapons) are all ways to measure capabilities as they pertain to the ability of a state to launch an intervention.

Table 2.2 summarizes these factors and the metrics that could be used to assess or measure them in different contexts.

---

[56] Benjamin A. Most and Harvey Starr, *Inquiry, Logic and International Politics*, Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1989.

[57] Rost and Greig, 2011; Paul K. Huth, "Major Power Intervention in International Crises, 1918–1988," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 42, No. 6, December 1998, pp. 744–770.

Table 2.2
Measuring Drivers of Military Interventions

Category	Factors Affecting the Likelihood of Adversary Military Interventions	Definition
Geopolitics	External threat to sovereignty	Actual or threatened attack, territorial claim, or forced regime change
	Regional power balance	Assessment of the impact on the regional balance of power of a potential intervention
	Alliance/partnership	Formal or informal relationship that encourages a state to support another through intervention
	National status	Opportunity to preserve or increase international standing through a potential intervention
Domestic	Domestic politics and legitimacy	Domestic political dynamics that can drive interventions: • Leader popularity and survival • Bureaucratic politics • Regime type • Party politics and elections
	Co-identity group populations in host	Presence of co-identity group populations in intervention target, especially if threatened
	Economic interests	Protection of economic assets, access to resources, pursuit of economic opportunities and trade
Ideational	Leadership and personality	Leadership type and propensity to launch intervention or use military force
	Ideology	Set of beliefs or a worldview that drives intervention to advance or counter that ideology
Enablers	Capabilities	Military and economic resources required to support an intervention

Theoretical Drivers of Iranian Military Interventions

With this generalized framework defined, we reviewed research focused specifically on Iranian military interventions to determine which of the factors discussed in this chapter have historically been most relevant to this case. As part of this effort, we reviewed a diverse body of literature that included largely primary sources, such as official statements by political figures in Iran (e.g., the country's supreme leader and members of the executive and legislative branches), military commanders (including both the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps [IRGC] and conventional military, known as the Artesh), and Iranian media reporting (recognizing, of course, the potential biases contained in these records). In particular, we relied on Iranian state media, especially those outlets close to or affiliated with the Iranian armed forces (chiefly the IRGC). Although often clearly biased in their reporting, these sources provide an important window into Iranian thinking on and perceptions of the conflicts and the country's role in them.[58]

Although prior scholarship comprehensively discusses the role of various factors in shaping Iranian *foreign* and *security* policies, it does not extensively apply these factors to the country's *military* interventions, perhaps owing to the fact that there have been relatively few of them during the existence of the Islamic Republic. Despite these challenges and limitations in the existing literature, our analysis identified several factors from the available primary and secondary sources as potentially important drivers shaping Iran's decision to intervene militarily outside its borders—as well as how it does so. Nevertheless, much of the following discussion necessarily conflates the scholarship on Iranian military interventions and broader Iranian national security thinking and foreign policy. One common theme emerging from our

---

[58] To check these sources and provide a more accurate account of Iran's activities and potential motivations, we also surveyed other primary source material, including statements and reports produced by the U.S. government, international bodies, and nongovernmental organizations for explanatory factors. We also heavily relied on contemporaneous reporting by major Western and regional news outlets for the facts of Iranian interventions, the chain of events, and figures, which are often heavily distorted by Iranian media.

assessment is a persistent tension between factors encouraging military adventurism and ones affecting pragmatic restraint.

First, we note at the outset that, in general, scholars agree that an ideational factor, *revolutionary ideology*, and the domestic factor pertaining to the presence of co-identity group populations (specifically, Muslim Shias) play a foundational role in Iranian foreign and national security decisions—and in Tehran's military planning.[59] When the Islamic Republic of Iran replaced the Imperial State of Iran in 1979, the revolutionary leaders vowed to drastically change the country's approach to foreign and military affairs. At the time, they frequently spoke about exporting their movement's ideology and values beyond Iran's borders. As Erik A. Olson notes, the connection between ideology and use of military force was even codified in the constitution of the new Islamic Republic:

> The preamble to Iran's constitution identifies the religious nature of its military's mission, stating that the military will fulfill, "the ideological mission of jihad in God's way." The constitution formalizes Islam as the basis for doctrine, stating "In the formation and equipping of the country's defence forces, due attention must be paid to faith and ideology as the basic criteria." The constitution also quotes the Qur'an, in Surat al-Anfal, "Prepare against them whatever force you are able to muster, and horses ready for battle, striking fear into Gods [sic] enemy and your enemy, and others beyond them unknown to you but known to God." While inferring a theological basis for a defensive or deterrent military

[59] For treatments of Iran's relationship with co-identity group populations and how these ties affect Iranian foreign policy and military endeavors, see Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*, revised ed., New York: Norton, 2016; Ali Alfoneh, *Iran Unveiled – How the Revolutionary Guards Is Turning Theocracy into Military Dictatorship*, Washington, D.C.: AEI Press, 2013; Shireen T. Hunter, "Iran and the Spread of Revolutionary Islam," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 2, April 1988; Imad Salamey and Zanoubia Othman, "Shia Revival and *Welayat Al-Faqih* in the Making of Iranian Foreign Policy," *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2011; and Martin Walker, "The Revenge of the Shia," *Wilson Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 4, Fall 2006.

> doctrine, the verse may also provide the regime with justifications to expand its military capabilities.[60]

The new regime's rhetoric seemed to signal a much more robust foreign policy, one geared toward undertaking military interventions to fight adversaries and support clients throughout the region.

Yet as the literature also points out (and as we show in more detail in the quantitative analysis presented in Chapter Three), four decades of Iranian interventions paint a different picture from that of a purely ideologically driven revolutionary state. Thus, although some scholars assess that revolutionary ideology and religious (Muslim Shia) co-identity matter above all else as drivers of Iranian interventionism, others contend that the role of these two factors may actually be more limited than Iranian rhetoric sometimes suggests.[61] As a 2009 RAND analysis concluded, such Cold War analytical lenses are antiquated: "The Islamic Republic does not seek territorial aggrandizement or even, despite its rhetoric, the forcible imposition of its revolutionary ideology onto neighboring states. Instead, it feeds off existing grievances with the status quo, particularly in the Arab world."[62]

To the extent that ideology ever served as a primary driver of Iranian intervention behavior, according to Ray Takeyh, "[t]he 1980s would be the apogee of [Iranian] revolutionary activism."[63] Some subject experts pose that "revolutionary ideology" and "religious co-identity" may actually be more relevant today to analyses of *how* Tehran pursues

---

60 Erik A. Olson, "Iran's Path Dependent Military Doctrine," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 2, Summer 2016, p. 68.

61 For example, see John Bulloch and Harvey Morris, *The Gulf War: Its Origins, History and Consequences*, London: Methuen, 1989; Hiro, 1989; Juneau, 2020; and Thomas Juneau and Sam Razavi, "Introduction: Alone in the World," in Thomas Juneau and Sam Razavi, eds., *Iranian Foreign Policy Since 2001: Alone in the World*, New York: Routledge, 2013.

62 Frederic Wehrey, David E. Thaler, Nora Bensahel, Kim Cragin, Jerrold D. Green, Dalia Dassa Kaye, Nadia Oweidat, and Jennifer J. Li, *Dangerous but Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East,* Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-781-AF, 2009, p. xiv.

63 Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs*, Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 2.

its political objectives militarily rather than *why* Tehran pursues its political objectives militarily. Some scholars also posit that, far from being mutually exclusive, the two sets of factors may actually reinforce each other or at least operate hand in hand.[64] This discussion is particularly relevant in the cases of Iranian interventions in Iraq and Syria. The protection of Shia groups in Iraq is widely identified in the literature as both a driver of Iranian intervention and the means by which Tehran intervened. Likewise, religious ties with the Assad regime are seen as playing a role in drawing the Islamic Republic into the civil war in Syria.

Second, to the contrary, a significant school of thought posits that pragmatic geostrategic considerations—particularly over regional power balance concerns—drive Iranian foreign interventionism above all else, as opposed to primarily ideological, religious, domestic, and/or territorial expansionist factors.[65] Some scholarship concludes that the Islamic Republic's military interventions have been predominantly driven by "realist" objectives: regime survival, defense of sovereignty, nationalism, deterrence of aggression, support for client actors, and projection and maximization of regional power. In all, these highlight the importance of the three key geopolitical factors: regional power balance and stability, external threat, and alliance or partnership with host. Wehrey, Thaler, et al., 2009, argues, for instance, that Iranian "ideology and bravado frequently mask a preference for opportunism and realpolitik—the qualities that define 'normal' state behavior."[66] The literature partly explains Iran's interventions in both Iraq and Syria in such terms: Tehran's intervention was designed to counter an external threat in the case of the former and to prevent a change in the balance of power following a potential collapse of a key ally in that of the latter.[67]

---

[64] Ray Takeyh, "Iran, Israel and the Politics of Terrorism," *Survival*, Vol. 48, No. 4, 2006.

[65] Milani, 2006; Juneau, 2020;Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 2016; Juneau, 2016.

[66] Wehrey, Thaler, et al., 2009, p. xiii.

[67] Juneau, 2020; Dina Esfandiary and Ariane Tabatabai, "Iran's ISIS Policy," *International Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 1, 2015.

These geopolitical hypotheses are, of course, supported by the vast literature referenced earlier on the Iran-Iraq War (during which the Islamic Republic faced an existential threat) but also by the emergent literature focused on the post-2003 period, which is characterized by unprecedented overt and covert Iranian interventionism in its near abroad. First (and at the most basic level), there is a broad consensus in the literature that recent Iranian adventurism has, at least in part, been driven by genuine external threat perceptions.[68] The nature and extent of these external threat perceptions will be explored in more detail in the case studies presented in Chapters Four and Five, but we note here that scholars generally agree that four specific threats have, at least in part, commonly driven Iran's post-2003 overt and covert interventions in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, and elsewhere.

Specifically, these include the Iranian regime's security fears regarding (1) geopolitical "encirclement and strangulation" by the United States and its allies, (2) the rise of ISIS and proliferation of Sunni jihadist terrorism in Iran, (3) renewal of historic military rivalries with neighboring and regional states, and (4) popular spillover and domestic unrest ignited by the Arab Spring.[69] As Ostovar, 2016, observes, in each of these areas, "[t]he Islamic Republic saw [both] peril and opportunity."[70] In other words, although Tehran's security concerns have played an important part in shaping its decisionmaking around military interventions, so have the possibilities of greater influence and power projection. As discussed in more detail later, the presence of a threat but no potential opportunity may be a key difference between the cases in which Iran has intervened (in Iraq and Syria, for example) and those in which it has not, such as in Afghanistan. Similarly, Juneau, 2015, posits that, "[a]s a rising power faced with a

---

[68] Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iranian Foreign Policy*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2015; Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran–Saudi Arabia Relations and Regional Order*, London: Routledge, 2014; Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 2016; Nader, 2015.

[69] On Iranian external threat perceptions as a (partial) driver of regional interventions in the post-2003 period, see, for instance, Wehrey, Thaler, et al., 2009, p. xiii.

[70] Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 205.

window of opportunity and surrounded by hostile states—especially, in Tehran's view, the hegemony-seeking United States—Iran should behave like an offensive realist."[71]

In short, external threat perceptions appear to be among the strongest factors influencing Tehran's decisions to commit forces abroad historically. In fact, as the quantitative analysis in Chapter Three will show, this factor seems to be a historical prerequisite to the deployment of Iranian forces abroad. (If this seems a somewhat obvious observation, we note by comparison that other U.S. adversaries, such as Russia and China, have shown patterns of deploying forces in the post–Cold War period to foreign interventions in which external threats were clearly *not* involved.)[72]

On another geopolitical level, the secondary literature on Iranian interventions frequently emphasizes broader regional power-balancing as one of the strongest factors influencing the nation's military decisionmaking.[73] For most of the Islamic Republic's history, the country has been largely isolated in the Middle East and has had to contend with several adversaries backed by the United States, particularly Israel and the Gulf Arabs but also, for instance, Saddam Hussein's Iraq during the 1980s. The Iran-Iraq War taught Iranian decisionmakers that strong nearby states could represent a vital threat to Iranian national security. And for the first decade of its existence, the Islamic Republic operated in a bipolar international system, in a region that had been historically prone to Cold War proxy conflicts between the United States and the

71 Juneau, 2015, p. 6.

72 See the companion volumes in this series: Kavanagh, Frederick, Chandler, et al., 2021; Samuel Charap, Edward Geist, Bryan Frederick, John J. Drennan, Nathan Chandler, and Jennifer Kavanagh, *Russia's Military Interventions: Patterns, Drivers, and Signposts*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A444-3, 2021; and Timothy R. Heath, Christian Curriden, Bryan Frederick, Nathan Chandler, and Jennifer Kavanagh, *China's Military Interventions: Patterns, Drivers, and Signposts*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A444-4, 2021.

73 On balance of power concerns as a (partial) factor influencing historic Iranian military interventions, see, for instance, Juneau, 2015; Chubin and Tripp, 2014; Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 2016; Nader, 2015; U.S. Army, 2019a; and U.S. Army, 2019b.

Soviet Union.[74] These conflicts affected Iran directly at times, spilling into its territory and undermining its sovereignty (as was the case in 1953, when a U.S.-backed coup overthrew Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq and reinstated the Shah).[75]

The collapse of the Soviet Union ushered in a new American-dominated unipolar world. The 1991 Gulf War fully cemented U.S. supremacy in the region with a resounding and quick victory. As Imad Salamey and Zanoubia Othman explain, these events led to Iran's foreign policy evolving "into a series of pragmatic measures that tempered its revolutionary zeal, leading to domestic divisions between the pragmatists-reformists and the ideologists-radical guards."[76] Then, after the U.S. post-9/11 interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, Tehran grew to feel increasingly encircled.[77] Many scholars maintain that Tehran has primarily been motivated to deploy military force abroad since 2003 to change the balance of power to its advantage and draw key new constituencies and countries into its sphere of influence.

These observers argue that Iran "learned with the fall of Saddam that it could successfully exploit power vacuums for strategic gains" and that regional power projection has largely driven Iranian behavior since the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.[78] Unlike during the previous two decades, the regime was now fully in control of its territory and population and was not busy with a defensive war. Hence, it was able to leverage the power vacuum more effectively than before. The 1982 Lebanon War could also have afforded Tehran an opportunity for greater influence in a key country, but it occurred at an inopportune time, when Iran was busy defending against an Iraqi invasion.

According to these lines of argument, the post-9/11 wars and the Arab Spring provided the regime with an opportunity to shape the regional landscape to its advantage and liking, and these geopolitical

---

[74] Salamey and Othman, 2011, p. 202.

[75] Salamey and Othman, 2011, p. 202.

[76] Salamey and Othman, 2011, p. 202.

[77] Wehrey, Thaler, et al., 2009, p. xiii.

[78] Ostovar, 2016, p. 205; Nader, 2015, pp. 12–13.

balancing opportunities—rather than acute external threat perceptions per se—have most strongly affected Iranian decisions to commit overt and covert forces to such theaters as Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and Yemen in recent years.[79] Moreover, despite claiming that it wants to rid the region of foreign powers, Iran has increasingly shown a willingness to work with friendly great powers (specifically, Russia and China) to achieve its regional balance of power objectives: another signal, perhaps, of strong realist currents governing Iranian use of military force.[80] In both Syria and Iraq, Iran has worked with foreign powers implicitly or explicitly: with Russia in Syria and with the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq.[81]

Relatedly, the literature also recognizes the role of maintaining support for partners and allies as a historic motivator for Iranian military adventurism abroad. This role touches on two often interconnected factors: alliance or partnership with host and the presence of co-identity group populations in host. As noted earlier, since the collapse of the U.S.-backed Shah, Iran has often found itself isolated on the international stage. Much of Iran's regional strategy is shaped around the country's network of (few) state and (numerous) nonstate allies and partners.[82] As Ostovar points out, the regime in several instances has intervened in conflicts in the region at least in part to support these allies, including the Assad regime in Syria and the Shia militias in Iraq.[83] (Similarly, some scholarship notes that strengthening support

---

[79] Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 2016; Nader, 2015; U.S. Army, 2019a; U.S. Army, 2019b; Juneau, 2016; Juneau, 2020.

[80] Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Jeremy White, and David Botti, "The U.S. Has Troops in Syria. So Do the Russians and Iranians. Here's Where," *New York Times*, April 11, 2018; Robin Wright, "Russia and Iran Deepen Ties to Challenge Trump and the United States," *The New Yorker*, March 2, 2018; and Scott W. Harold and Alireza Nader, *China and Iran: Economic, Political, and Military Relations*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, OP-351-CMEPP, 2012, p. 5.

[81] Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 2015.

[82] Ostovar, 2016, p. 205.

[83] Ostovar, 2016, p. 205.

for Hezbollah was a secondary factor in these intervention decisions, particularly to maintain access to land routes to Lebanon.)[84]

On the other hand, a closer look at Iran's track record in interventions indicates that the country often only intervenes in support of its allies when other interests are also involved, possibly indicating that Iranian alliance considerations might typically be a less important geostrategic factor than power-balancing or external threat perceptions. As Iran scholar David Menashri notes, for example, although Iran was reluctant to conduct a military intervention to support Iraqi Shia groups in the 1990s for fear of sparking escalation with Saddam Hussein, it has been much more inclined to do so since the collapse of his regime in 2003.[85] In other words, alliances with friendly states and nonstate groups (including large Shia co-identity populations) might be best characterized as "necessary but insufficient" factors (all the factors identified here are multicausal) affecting Iranian decisionmaking with respect to its military interventions. This finding is confirmed further when we explore the Afghanistan nonintervention case in some detail. Unlike the United States and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies, Tehran does not maintain any formal mutual defense treaties or obligations with other states; therefore, alliance considerations (alone) are unlikely ever to be the sole (or even primary) determinants of Iranian ground force commitments.

The literature also provides some (albeit weaker) support for miscellaneous secondary drivers of Iranian foreign interventions. For instance, Wehrey, Thaler, et al., 2009, posits that some of Tehran's political objectives behind its use of military force aim at "trying to effect far-reaching changes [even] on the . . . *global* stage [emphasis added]."[86] Moreover, some scholarship has suggested that *individual*

---

[84] Brandon Friedman, "Iran's Hezbollah Model in Iraq and Syria: Fait Accompli?" *Orbis*, Vol. 62, No. 3, 2018; James Dobbins, Philip Gordon, and Jeffrey Martini, *A Peace Plan for Syria III: Agreed Zones of Control, Decentralization, and International Administration*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-233-RC, 2017.

[85] David Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran: Religion, Society and Power*, London: Routledge, 2001, p. 233.

[86] Wehrey, Thaler, et al., 2009, p. iii.

leaders and personalities have played a significant, yet understudied role in shaping Iranian military interventions.[87] In a 2019 *Foreign Affairs* follow-on to their 2001 *International Security* article assessing the role of leaders in shaping foreign policy, Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollack consider the case of Ali Khamenei as the key figure behind Iranian national security decisions.[88] They contend that factional politics drive Iranian policies and that Khamenei is the pivot: In the cases of the conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, Khamenei sided with hardliners to double down on the interventions, while in the case of the 2012–2015 nuclear talks, for example, he sided with the moderates or pragmatists.[89] A different leader, such as Ayatollah Mohammad Reza Golpaygani—a senior Shia cleric who had once been a contender for supreme leader succession—Byman and Pollack posit, "would likely have erred . . . less on the side of aggressive foreign policy."[90]

Others have downplayed the role of domestic factors pertaining to domestic politics and legitimacy and the ideational factor linked to adversary leadership and personality, noting that the geopolitical structural drivers shaping Iranian threat perception and security considerations (such as the country's "strategic loneliness") outweigh leaders' preferences.[91] Relatedly, another relatively underexplored factor in the literature is the role of regime factionalism and internal competition—like that of U.S. domestic partisan politics—in guiding Iranian intervention decisionmaking.[92] In fact, as Juneau, 2015,

---

[87] Daniel Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, "Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In," *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 4, Spring 2001, pp. 132–133; Juneau, 2015.

[88] Daniel Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, "Beyond Great Forces," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2019.

[89] Byman and Pollack, 2019.

[90] Byman and Pollack, 2019.

[91] Thomas Juneau, "Iran Under Rouhani: Still Alone in the World," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 21, No. 4, Winter 2014.

[92] The literature on factional politics and military interventions in Iran is thin. It includes Tabaar, 2019. There exists a relatively more developed literature on factional politics and foreign policy decisionmaking in Iran, including Ariane M. Tabatabai, *Iran's National Security Debate: Implications for Future U.S.-Iran Negotiations*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corpo-

notes, "Iranian foreign policy is shaped by three intervening variables: status, regime identity, and factional politics."[93] Finally, we find that other literature has identified the possible role that international symbolism and prestige-building has played in Iran's post-9/11 military adventures, particularly how Tehran has endeavored to shape its image as a country able to project power that goes beyond its means.[94]

A brief review of an Iranian nonintervention case provides a window into the role (and lack of importance) that domestic politics and factional disputes may play in Iranian intervention decisions. Specifically, we review the case of the 1990s standoff between Iran and Afghanistan, then controlled by the Taliban, as perhaps one of the most significant and well-documented such cases. In 1997, in a show of force and counter-Iran credentials aimed at appealing to Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, the Taliban took several steps to undermine Iranian presence in Afghanistan. These steps brought the two countries to the brink of war and included the closing of the Iranian embassy in Kabul and accusing Tehran of interference in Afghan affairs.[95] For its part, Iran supported the Northern Alliance against the Taliban, whose rule it refused to recognize.[96] Tensions came to a boiling point when the Taliban took several Iranian diplomats, a journalist, and several other nationals hostage in 1998, leading Iran to mobilize more than 70,000 forces by the border.[97] When it became clear that the hostages had been killed, Iran vowed payback and raised the number of forces ready to intervene in Afghanistan to some 200,000.[98]

---

ration, PE-344-RC, 2019; and Daniel Byman, Shahram Chubin, Anoushiravan Ehteshami, and Jerrold D. Green, *Iran's Security Policy in the Post-Revolutionary Era*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MR-1320-OSD, 2001.

93 Juneau, 2015, p. 8.

94 Ewan Stein, "Ideological Codependency and Regional Order: Iran, Syria, and the Axis of Refusal," *PS: Political Science & Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 3, July 2017.

95 Milani, 2006, pp. 244–245.

96 Milani, 2006, pp. 244–245.

97 Milani, 2006, p. 245.

98 Milani, 2006, p. 245.

However, key decisionmakers belonging to all factions, including Khamenei, then President Mohammad Khatami (a prominent reformist), and his powerful pragmatist predecessor, Aliakbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, all opposed an overt and direct conflict. Ultimately, this close call became an important case of nonintervention.[99] Instead of direct conflict, Iran engaged in a limited advise-and-assist mission supporting the Northern Alliance even as the Taliban became emboldened until the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent toppling of the Taliban, which Iran aided in its initial stages by providing intelligence and political support, such as bringing key stakeholders to the negotiating table.[100] The existing literature on this episode stops short of comprehensively diagnosing the causes and drivers of Iran's decision not to intervene in Afghanistan.[101] However, the scholarship's treatment of this event offers several insights into Iran's thinking.

First, according to Adam Tarock and Mohsen Milani, whose respective articles on Iran-Afghanistan relations are staples of the scholarship on the topic, a large part of Iran's decision not to intervene in Afghanistan in retaliation for the Taliban's actions stemmed from the historical precedent set by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, which prompted the Iranians to believe that they may face a similar fate if they attacked Afghanistan.[102] Second, the events of 1998 may highlight the relative unimportance of factional politics in deciding not to intervene, pointing instead to the state behaving as a unitary actor in the context of interventions. As Milani explains, key leaders from across the political spectrum opposed a war, believing that although they may be able to start one successfully, they may not be able to terminate the conflict on their terms or in a timely manner,

---

99 Sajjan M. Gohel, "Iran's Ambiguous Role in Afghanistan," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 3, No. 3, March 2010.

100 Milani, 2006, p. 245; Gohel, 2010; Nader et al., 2014.

101 Milani, 2006, pp. 244–245; Gohel, 2010; Nader et al., 2014.

102 Milani, 2006, pp. 244–245; Adam Tarock, "The Politics of the Pipeline: The Iran and Afghanistan Conflict," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 4, August 1999, p. 801.

thus becoming entangled in yet another lengthy and costly war just a decade after the end of the Iran-Iraq War.[103]

Third, the case shows that having significant co-identity group populations (including ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic ties) does not necessarily lead to Iran intervening in a country. In fact, even the execution of 2,000–5,000 predominantly Shia civilians in Mazar-e Sharif did not drive Iran to intervene despite official rhetoric referring to the incident as "barbaric" and to the fate of the Hazaras as a "highly critical issue."[104] This is not to say that Iran did not see the plight of co-identity group populations as relevant and even important but rather that its security considerations outweighed this factor.[105] According to Tarock, from Iran's perspective, being dragged into a war with the Taliban would entail a conflict in which the adversary was supported by two major Muslim allies (Saudi Arabia and Pakistan) and potentially even the United States.[106] Instead, Tehran opted for lower-cost, more-covert operations leveraging these ties.[107] This example should therefore temper our finding regarding the importance of the presence of co-identity populations. Although these populations appear to be close to a necessary condition for Iranian interventions, they are not sufficient on their own. Instead, calculations regarding the likely strategic and geopolitical effects of the intervention appear to be more central.

Summary: Possible Factors

In short, although there are no comprehensive academic studies synthesizing the historic trends and patterns in why, when, where, and how Iran conducts military interventions, our preliminary survey of the lit-

103 Milani, 2006, pp. 244–245.

104 Tarock, 1999, p. 812.

105 Tarock, 1999, p. 813.

106 Tarock, 1999, p. 813.

107 Milani, 2006, pp. 244–245; Gohel, 2010; Nader et al., 2014; Tarock, 1999.

erature and short examinations of key cases found that several factors are likely to be more salient than others. Perhaps most acutely, these factors include broad geopolitical concerns about regional balance of power and external security threats. Further, according to our initial assessment of the literature, such factors as co-identity religious populations, supporting allies and partners, reducing Iran's international isolation, exporting revolutionary ideology and values, and maintaining domestic public opinion likely matter as well, but these drivers may be more likely to be of secondary significance. We did not find support for other possible explanations raised in the broader literature on the factors affecting military interventions for other states, including the potential roles of economic objectives (either narrow or broad), territorial ambitions or claims, individual personalities and leadership, internal regime politics, national prestige-building, or global or international norm-setting.

In the chapters that follow, we build on this preliminary factor framework. First, in Chapter Three, we conduct a quantitative analysis of overall trends and patterns in Iranian military interventions. Then, in Chapters Four and Five, we subject the relevance of each of these possible factors to additional scrutiny by examining them in the context of in-depth intervention case studies.

CHAPTER THREE

Patterns in Historical Iranian Military Interventions

To help understand where and when Iran is likely to intervene militarily in the future, it would be helpful to first understand the historical record of Iranian interventions. To that end, this chapter reviews the results of our collection of a data set of every Iranian military intervention since 1979.[1] We first describe how we collected this information, including our definition for military interventions and the additional variables describing characteristics of these interventions that we coded. We then present several descriptive statistics and graphs that illustrate key patterns in the historical data of Iranian military interventions. We conclude with a brief examination of patterns in the data that relate to hypotheses discussed in Chapter Two.

Identifying Iranian Military Interventions

As described in Chapter One, we define an Iranian military intervention as any deployment of military forces to another country (or international waters or airspace) during the 1979–2018 period in which two additional parameters were satisfied regarding (1) the size of the force involved and (2) the activities in which the force was engaged.[2]

1 This effort is part of a larger effort to collect all military interventions by U.S. adversaries, detailed in Kavanagh, Frederick, Chandler, et al., 2021.

2 Implicit in this definition is some ambiguity regarding the sovereign status of disputed territories. In this study, we consider sovereign countries to be those included in Correlates of

The purpose of the size criteria was to eliminate small uses of force that may be less important, less intentionally directed by the national government, or at least more difficult to track consistently over time. The purpose of the requirement that the forces involved be engaged in a particular set of activities was to eliminate cases in which a state may forward-deploy forces as a convenient alternative to basing them at home but in which the forces were otherwise engaged in the same activities they would have been doing inside the country and were not substantially interacting with or affecting the host state or population. As an additional criterion, the forces involved must have been part of the country's military; interventions by state-aligned paramilitary forces, proxy organizations, and/or intelligence services are excluded.

In the case of Iran, we have included all interventions by the different branches of the country's armed forces: the paramilitary IRGC, the conventional military (or Artesh), and the volunteer militias known as the Basij. We excluded interventions by Iranian-aligned local and foreign fighters comprising proxy militias and non-Iranian paramilitary organizations. Although this approach has some limitations, we made the decision to exclude non-Iranian forces in order to focus on strictly Iranian interventions, which we identified as an important gap in the scholarly literature. The primary vehicle through which Iran conducts interventions is the use of other groups. Hence, the exclusion of proxies drastically reduces the number of Iranian interventions. In some theaters, Iran's foreign militias have served as a quasi-integral part of its armed forces, working under Iranian command and trained,

---

War's country code list. Additionally, to determine whether individual adversary incursions into disputed territories constituted a foreign intervention per se, we referred to the Issue Correlates of War Territorial Claims data set to determine whether, in disputed territory, the actor was the target of the claim (in which case, it was assumed to have possession of the territory) or the challenger was the target of the claim (in which case, it was assumed not to have possession of the territory, and therefore it was assumed that this territory was a possible location for a military intervention). See Correlates of War Project, "State System Membership (v2016)," undated; and Bryan Frederick, Paul R. Hensel, and Christopher Macaulay, "The Issue Correlates of War Territorial Claims Data, 1816–2001," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 54, No. 1, 2017.

armed, and deployed by Iranians. Since the Arab Spring in particular, these militias have become "an extension of Iran's military power."[3]

Despite these limitations, we chose to exclude these groups for several conceptual reasons. First, even Lebanese Hezbollah—Iran's closest and most loyal proxy—does not act as a branch of the Iranian armed forces, given that command and control is not direct.[4] Other groups respond even less to Iran. As Wehrey, Thaler, et al., 2009, put it, "we assess that Iran will never reliably *control* these groups and that, even in the case of Hezbollah, Iran's expenditure of financial resources and military aid has not translated into unquestioned loyalty by a group it essentially founded."[5] "Influence," the authors conclude, "is not the same as control." In fact, "Tehran's assistance does not buy unconditional loyalty; these groups may be willing to act independently when their own organizational interests and agendas are at stake."[6] In other words, Iran's relationship with Hezbollah can be characterized as "strategic influence," not "control."[7] Second, militias' interests can diverge from Iran's, leading the relationship to fade.[8] Third, Iran's relationship with these groups is similar to other countries' alliances with other states, and we are not considering the role of alliances in our study. More details on the size and activity type criteria are included in the following sections.

Force Size Threshold

To warrant inclusion, the deployed ground, naval, and/or air forces of the intervention force had to cross minimum size thresholds, which

---

3 Ostovar, 2019, p. 172.

4 According to the IRGC and Hezbollah's leader Seyyed Hassan Nasrullah, "Iran does not give any orders and does not want anything . . . in domestic and regional issues." See "Nasrullah: Iran emperaturo nist balke keshvari ast Islami ke be mellat-ha komak mikonad," *Tasnim News*, March 27, 2015.

5 Wehrey, Thaler, et al., 2009, p. 83; Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 2016.

6 Wehrey, Thaler, et al., 2009, p. 85.

7 Wehrey, Thaler, et al., 2009, p. 86.

8 Ostovar, 2019.

were designed to be relatively inclusive.[9] The minimum size thresholds included different specifications depending on the domain in which forces were operating: land, sea, or air. To qualify as an intervention on the basis of ground forces, the deployment had to include military personnel from any service branch deployed for at least 100 person-years. This size threshold could include 100 troops deployed for one year or a larger number of troops deployed for a shorter period (e.g., 200 troops for six months or 1,200 troops for one month).[10] This person-year size threshold needs to be met in each year of the intervention. So, for example, a deployment of ten troops for ten years would not qualify for inclusion in our data set.

To qualify as an intervention on the basis of the naval forces involved, the deployment had to involve the presence of a substantial portion of Iran's naval forces rather than the isolated deployment of one or two ships. This relatively higher bar for inclusion (in comparison with ground forces) was adopted because of the inherently more mobile nature of naval forces to avoid coding a large number of naval-only interventions involving the deployment of one or two ships that may not even have been explicitly decided on or authorized by national-level decisionmakers. In the RAND U.S. Military Intervention Dataset, which this effort was modeled on, a U.S. carrier strike group or larger force was required for a naval intervention to be identified.[11] Given the

---

9 Our definition and thresholds for inclusion for military interventions in this report are chosen to be consistent with previous RAND work on U.S. military interventions (see Kavanagh, Frederick, Povlock, et al., 2017) and with the other reports on adversary interventions in this series (see Charap et al., 2021; Heath et al., 2021; and Kavanagh, Frederick, Chandler, et al., 2021). We recognize that, in the case of Iran, these criteria exclude certain types of activity, and we address those limitations in Chapter One of this report.

10 In some rare instances, force levels during a multiyear intervention might temporarily have fallen below this threshold for an isolated year (and then again risen above it); as a general rule of thumb, we would nonetheless code it as a continuous mission. However, if there were long periods beneath this threshold either after the withdrawal of major forces or in the run-up to the deployment of major forces, then the intervention would be broken into different cases or otherwise exclude these years.

11 Jennifer Kavanagh, Bryan Frederick, Alexandra Stark, Nathan Chandler, Meagan L. Smith, Matthew Povlock, Lynn E. Davis, and Edward Geist, *Characteristics of Successful U.S. Military Interventions*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3062-A, 2019.

smaller number of carriers in the navies of non-U.S. states, we did not use this same criterion, but we did attempt to use a standard that represented an approximately equivalent proportion of that state's naval forces—which, in the Iranian case, was a low bar given the state of the IRGC and Artesh naval forces today. In addition, interventions involving any substantial kinetic naval activity, such as battles, skirmishes, or strikes using naval aircraft or missiles, were included regardless of the number and/or class of naval ships involved.

We took a similar approach to coding an intervention on the basis of the air forces involved. Whereas the deployment for the United States was required to involve roughly one wing-year of aircraft (e.g., 80 planes employed for a year, 160 planes for six months), the size threshold was interpreted proportionally when identifying Iranian interventions according to the relative disparity in baseline air force sizes. In addition, substantial instances of air-to-air or air-to-ground combat or strikes were included without needing to meet the plane-year size threshold.[12]

Force Activity Type

Beyond meeting these size parameters, the forces involved must have conducted at least one of the following ten activity types to satisfy our definition of a military intervention. Intentionally absent from this activity type taxonomy are categories for noncombatant evacuation operations, as well as general logistics, support, and communications. Additionally, we do not include in our definition of foreign interventions general forward deployments of troops and/or supplies and weapons depots, unless they also satisfy one of the activity types (e.g., a clear deterrent function). The list of activity types are

1. **Advisory and foreign internal defense.** Interventions involving military advisers or trainers. The focus of these interven-

[12] Minor air-to-air incidents, such as the downing of a single fighter in contested airspace, would not meet this threshold. Likewise, in most cases, instances involving limited artillery or mortar fires across international borders at random targets would generally not constitute a foreign intervention, absent other conditions.

tions is typically on preparing host-nation personnel to operate on their own.

2. **Counterinsurgency.** Interventions involving counterinsurgency activities, including "comprehensive civilian and military efforts designed to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and address its root causes."[13]
3. **Combat and conventional warfare.** Interventions characterized by formations of organized military forces deployed to conduct kinetic operations. The majority of interventions in this category involve the application of violent force by the intervener, but we also include cases in this category in which an intervener enters the territory of another state prepared for such an action but does not meet with armed resistance, and therefore violence does not result.
4. **Deterrence and signaling.** Interventions involving activities intended to send a signal to a potential adversary or other state regarding the intentions or capabilities of the intervener. Most cases in this category involve the deployment of military forces for deterrent purposes, but forces might be deployed in other instances to signal aggressive intent, intimidation, or coercion.
5. **Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.** Interventions involving humanitarian and relief operations, including responses to natural disasters and conflict.
6. **Security.** Interventions involving protection of the adversary's assets (e.g., embassies, corporations) or civilian personnel during periods of threat or unrest.
7. **Stability operations.** Interventions involving operations to stabilize or maintain peace in postconflict situations. These may include operations following coups or other situations causing unrest among the civilian population.
8. **Interdiction (air and naval only).** Interventions involving operations to interdict foreign military ships or aircraft, trade or

[13] Joint Publication 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, April 25, 2018, p. iii.

arms shipments, or refugees or migrants (e.g., naval blockades, no-fly zones).

9. **Lift and transport (air and naval only).** Interventions involving operations focused on movement of persons and supplies (not applicable to ground interventions).
10. **Intelligence and reconnaissance (air and naval only).** Interventions involving operations focused on intelligence or reconnaissance functions (not applicable to ground interventions).

In some cases, only one or two activity types may have been relevant to a given case; in others, more than three could arguably apply. For each intervention, the adversary database thus codes up to three activity types for each force type involved in the case (ground, naval, air), denoting the dominant or most common activity for each force, followed by the secondary and tertiary activity for each.

Researching Cases of Intervention

To identify the universe of Iranian cases satisfying these definitions, our research proceeded in three broad steps. First, with the intent of casting a wide initial net, we collected and aggregated case information from a variety of respected data sets on historical military interventions.[14] In general, we found a significant amount of overlap regard-

---

[14] See Nils Petter Gleditsch, Peter Wallensteen, Mikael Eriksson, Margareta Sollenberg, and Håvard Strand, "Armed Conflict 1946–2001: A New Dataset," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 39, No. 5, September 2002; Michael Brecher and Jonathan Wilkenfeld, *A Study of Crisis*, paperback ed., Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2000; Meredith Reid Sarkees and Frank Wayman, *Resort to War: A Data Guide to Inter-State, Extra-State, Intra-State, and Non-State Wars, 1816–2007*, Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2010; Glenn Palmer, Vito D'Orazio, Michael Kenwick, and Matthew Lane, "The MID4 Dataset, 2002–2010: Procedures, Coding Rules and Description," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 32, No. 2, 2015; Faten Ghosn, Glenn Palmer, and Stuart Bremer, "The MID3 Data Set, 1993–2001: Procedures, Coding Rules, and Description," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 21, No. 2, Summer 2004; Daniel M. Jones, Stuart A. Bremer, and J. David Singer, "Militarized Interstate Disputes, 1816–1992: Rationale, Coding Rules, and Empirical Patterns," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 1996; Patricia L. Sullivan and Michael T. Koch, "Military Intervention by Powerful States, 1945–2003," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 46, No. 5, September 2009; Frederic S. Pearson and Robert A. Baumann, *International Military Intervention, 1946–1988*, Ann Arbor, Mich.: Inter-University Con-

ing major conflicts and wars involving Iran, but we also found a great amount of divergence among data sets on more-minor foreign interventions and incursions. We further supplemented this preliminary list by crossing it with other secondary reference resources, such as the International Institute for Strategic Studies' *The Military Balance,* as well as hundreds of additional declassified U.S and foreign government documents, academic and think tank reports, and news articles.

Second, this preliminary list of Iranian interventions was divided among RAND subject-matter experts, who expanded, vetted, and refined it with primary and secondary resources. During this secondary stage of in-depth, case-by-case investigation, many preliminarily identified potential events were deemed not to meet all of the parameters described earlier and were ultimately excluded from the case universe. As an example, we examined Iran's activities in Afghanistan in the 1980s extensively before ultimately deciding to exclude the case. The main driver behind our decisionmaking was that it was not clear from the reports we examined that Iran met the requirements to qualify as an intervention *in* Afghanistan. We found inconclusive evidence about Iranian presence during the 1990s and post-2001. Available evidence seems to indicate that most of the activities were conducted indirectly and by supporting various third parties. A second example is Iran's involvement in the Balkans in the 1990s, where we found clear evidence of Iranian involvement but no authoritative evidence that the size threshold was met. The same challenges led us to exclude current Iranian activities in Venezuela and Somalia.[15]

Finally, to ensure consistent case-inclusion coding standards were applied across all actors and cases, the refined case universe was subjected to multiple rounds of iterative, case-by-case reviews by different team members.

---

sortium for Political and Social Research, Data Collection No. 6035, University of Michigan, 1993; and Emizet F. Kisangani and Jeffrey Pickering, *International Military Intervention, 1989–2005*, Ann Arbor, Mich.: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, Data Collection No. 21282, University of Michigan, 2008.

[15] Another example is that of Sudan in the 1990s, which was a borderline case in which we had evidence of Iranian involvement but no clear evidence that the required threshold was met.

Key Variables Collected

Having identified a case of Iranian military intervention, we then collected several additional pieces of information about each case. Some of these variables have already been noted: detailed information about the size of the information and the activities in which the forces were engaged. This information was collected at both the intervention level (including typical or average values) and the location-year level, enabling an understanding of how the size or activities of an intervention force may have changed over time. This also allowed us to specify the forces and activities associated with specific countries in instances where an intervention might take place in multiple countries. We should, however, stress again that the lack of adequate and accurate data on these conflicts in the open-source data limited our ability to fully account for all Iranian interventions and their scope.

Beyond the size and activity type variables, we also collected detailed information on the political objectives motivating the intervention and the degree of success that Iran had in achieving them.[16] When collecting the list of political objectives, we made a distinction between political and military or operational objectives.[17] We further collected the specific years in which the political objective was being pursued, allowing objectives to change over the course of the intervention. Although state policymakers in some cases were forthcoming about their objectives for an intervention, they appear to have been less so in other cases. We therefore relied not only on public statements but also on historical and other analyses that gave additional clues as to the true motivations of policymakers in pursuing an intervention.

---

16 More information on our objective and success codings can be found in Kavanagh, Frederick, Chandler, et al., 2021.

17 Political objectives, generally speaking, pointed to the "why" of the intervention: What motivated state decisionmakers to undertake the intervention? What were they hoping to accomplish? We therefore did not include military or operational objectives (the "how" of the intervention) that leaders may have also established as means or signposts toward achieving the political objectives. For example, the U.S. intervention in Iraq after 2003 had a political objective of stabilizing the country. In service of that political objective, the United States set a host of military or operational objectives, such as benchmarks for numbers of Iraqi police trained and provinces with reduced levels of insurgent activity. The data we collected on objectives were entirely focused on the political type.

Having identified the set of political objectives states pursued in each intervention, we then coded the degree of success they had in achieving them. We coded success using a straightforward, three-part scale: *success*, *some success*, and *no success*. The success of each objective was assessed by multiple coders with familiarity with the case, and discrepancies were adjudicated by the larger project team. The data on political objectives and success do not bear directly on the key questions in this report of anticipating when and where Iran is likely to undertake future military interventions, but we present descriptive statistics of these data in the following section and aim to pursue the implications of these data further in future research.

Descriptive Statistics and Graphs

Using this approach, we identified eight Iranian military interventions undertaken from 1979 to 2018. A complete list of the interventions we identified is found in Table 3.1.

The first question that we used our data to address was how often Iran intervened militarily. Figure 3.1 shows the number of interventions undertaken by Iran over time.

Overall, Iran has undertaken a limited number of military interventions since 1979, typically not more than one or two at a time. However, this appears to have changed after 2003, roughly corresponding with the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. After this point, we see an increase in the number of Iranian interventions, to a high of four interventions in 2018. This recent increase in Iranian interventions should nonetheless be kept in context. Figure 3.1 tells us how often Iran has intervened but tells us little about *how* Iran has intervened, including how many forces it has deployed. As Figure 3.2 illustrates, the number of Iranian troops involved in more-recent interventions has been limited.

The largest Iranian military intervention since 1979, by far, took place during the Iran-Iraq War, involving hundreds of thousands of troops deployed over the border into Iraqi territory. The size of this intervention so dwarfs others that it is difficult to see trends across Iran's other interventions. For this reason, Figure 3.3 provides the same

Table 3.1
Qualifying Iranian Military Interventions (1979–2018)

Intervention Name	Intervention Location	Start Year	End Year	Ground Size (Best Estimate)	Air Size	Naval Size
Iran-Iraq War[a]	Iraq	1980	1988	450,000	Large	Medium
Lebanon War[b]	Lebanon	1982	1982	1,500	None	None
Tanker War[c]	Persian Gulf	1984	1988	None	Small	Medium
Airstrikes Against Iraqi Kurdistan[d]	Iraq	1992	2001	None	Medium	None
Iranian Forces in Iraq Post-Saddam[e]	Iraq	2003	Ongoing	2,400	Small	None
Anti-Piracy Naval Operations off the Horn of Africa	Gulf of Aden, Gulf of Oman, Bab al-Mandab	2008	Ongoing	None	None	Small
Syrian civil war[f]	Syria	2011	Ongoing	2,500	Small	None
Iranian Rocket Strikes into Golan[g]	Israel (Golan)	2018	2018	None	Small	None

NOTE: Other cases considered but ultimately excluded because of the lack of adequate data or because they did not meet our criteria (in terms of size, presence in theater, and activity type) include Iran's involvement in Afghanistan, Sudan, and the Balkans in the 1990s.

[a] This case includes Iranian ground forces deployed to Iraqi Kurdistan in advisory and training roles as well as forces deployed to areas in southern Iraq, such as the Faw Peninsula, during the Iran-Iraq War.

[b] Different ground troop estimates exist in the literature and reporting about Iran's intervention in the Lebanon War. We have used our best estimate in this table.

[c] Although this naval conflict (the so-called Tanker War) is intimately related to the Iran-Iraq War, it is coded as a distinct intervention for two essential reasons, consistent with RAND researchers' theoretical case definitions in previous and ongoing research: the targets (non-Iraqi oil tanker and U.S. naval vessels) and political objectives differed from those of Iranian military efforts against Iraq.

[d] This case aggregates repeated instances of periodic Iranian airstrikes against Kurdish groups in Iraq, such as the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MeK). This case is distinct from Iranian operations in Kurdistan during the Iran-Iraq War.

[e] This case includes two distinct, contiguous phases: Iranian forces in Iraq during the U.S.-led occupation (2003–2011) and, more recently, the more robust Iranian presence in Iraq since the rise of ISIS.

[f] The precise number of Iranian troops in Syria remains disputed, with some estimates including proxy forces (which we exclude for the purposes of this study) and others underestimating the numbers. Here, we include our best estimate using months of data collection.

[g] Reporting on these strikes has been limited and largely traced back to Israeli media.

Figure 3.1
Number of Ongoing Iranian Military Interventions (1979–2018)

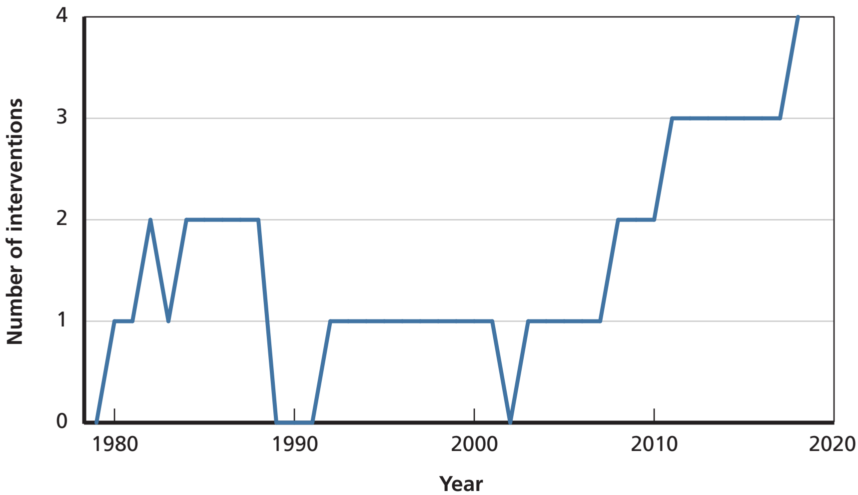
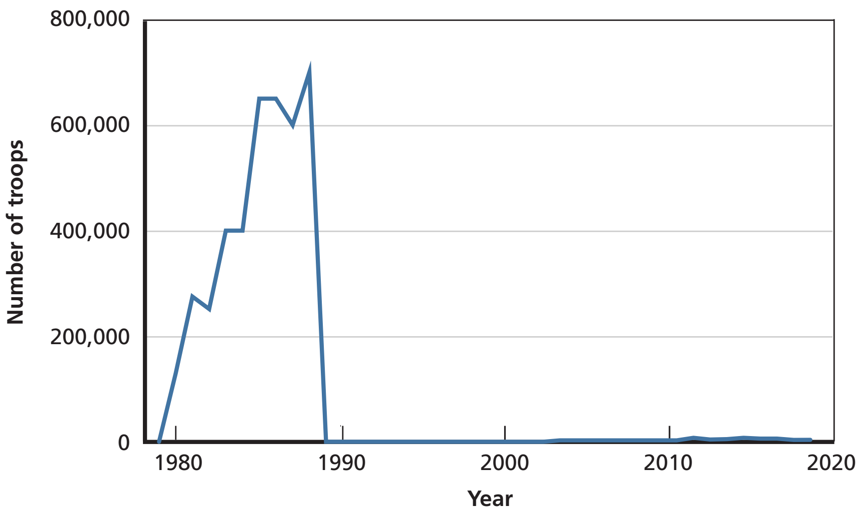


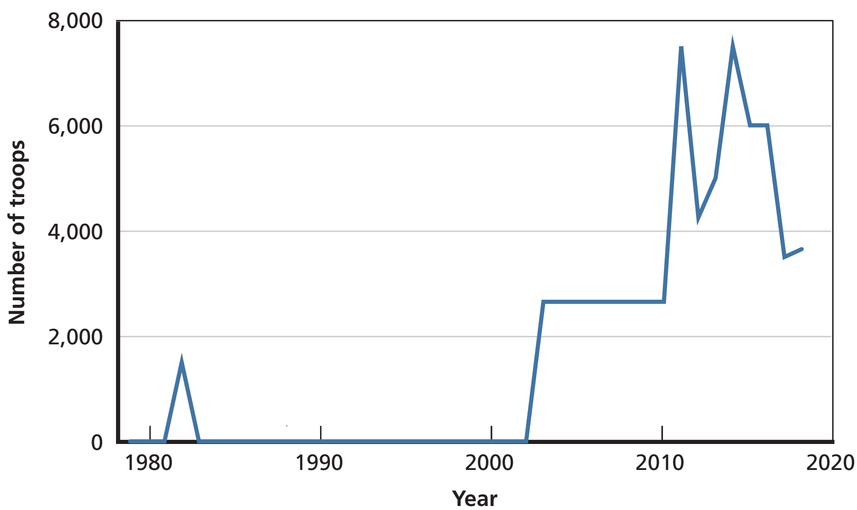
Figure 3.2
Number of Troops Involved in Iranian Military Interventions (1979–2018)



data as Figure 3.2 but omits the Iranian intervention in the Iran-Iraq War.

In Figure 3.3, we can see the notable recent increase in Iranian military interventions and number of forces deployed since 2003. Overall, these numbers remain relatively limited, mostly fluctuating between 3,000 and 7,000 troops total, but they still represent a clear increase over Iranian interventions before 2003—although it must be said that the reliability of the data remained a core concern for our research team. There are several plausible (likely mutually reinforcing) explanations for this uptick in Iranian interventions. First, the 1990s were a period of reconstruction and reform in Iran and left the country with little bandwidth for foreign interventions. After the Iran-Iraq War, the regime was narrowly focused on consolidating political power, introducing military reforms, and rebuilding the country's

Figure 3.3
Number of Troops Involved in Iranian Military Interventions, Excluding Iran-Iraq War (1979–2018)



economy and infrastructure.[18] Second, Saddam Hussein's Iraq still presented a check on Iran throughout the 1990s, albeit to a lesser degree than in the previous decade. And with the resounding success of the U.S. operations in Kuwait and President Bill Clinton's dual containment strategy, Iran felt it had less room to maneuver.[19] In other words, external threats loomed large, but the status quo seemed preferable to any alternatives in which the country would find itself at war again. Finally, the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and, less than a decade later, the Arab Spring both raised enough concerns in Iran while providing the country with much-needed space and opportunity to operate outside its borders.

Next, we asked where Iran has intervened. The geographic scope of Iranian military interventions and the presence of co-identity group populations in all these interventions is also worth discussing. All of Iran's military interventions have taken place comparatively close to its borders (in the greater Middle Eastern region) and within regions and countries with significant co-identity group populations. The interventions furthest from Iran were the antipiracy intervention in the Bab al-Mandab and Gulf of Aden (which do not involve Iranian co-identity groups) and multiple interventions in Lebanon and Syria, all still comparatively near to Iran. This limited geographic scope stands in contrast to other actors with which U.S. policymakers are often concerned, such as China and Russia, that have used their military more globally or even North Korea, which undertook more-distant interventions in sub-Saharan Africa during the Cold War. At least historically, Iranian military interventions have been notably geographically circumscribed. This stems in part from Iran's desire to assert itself in its immediate neighborhood rather than build a profile globally. It is also due to the

---

18 See Said Amir Arjomand, *After Khomeini*, Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2009; Daniel Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001; and Frederic Wehrey, Jerrold D. Green, Brian Nichiporuk, Lydia Hansell, Rasool Nafisi, and S. R. Bohandy, *The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-821-OSD, 2009.

19 Kenneth M. Pollack, "Containing Iran," in Robin Wright, ed., *The Iran Primer: Power, Politics, and U.S. Policy*, Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2010.

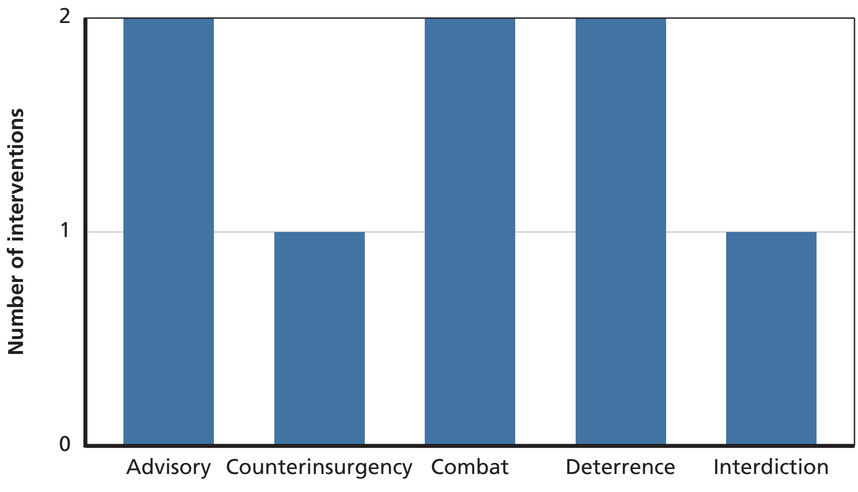
constraints faced by the Islamic Republic. Iran's military capabilities are limited, so its ability to intervene is more constrained than, for example, the United States. Instead, it must keep its interventions, or at least its sizable ones, close to home.

Finally, we considered what types of activities Iranian forces have engaged in while deployed. On this measure, Iranian interventions have been fairly diverse, as shown in Figure 3.4.

The breadth of activities in which Iran's forces have been engaged is somewhat notable, given the small number of military interventions that the country has undertaken. From large-scale combat to smaller-scale advisory roles and primarily naval interdictions, Iranian military forces have been deployed in a flexible range of contexts, despite their much more limited geographic scope. For example,

- the Iran-Iraq War entailed combat and advisory components
- Iran's intervention in Iraq following the U.S. occupation and to counter ISIS encompasses advisory and counterinsurgency missions

Figure 3.4
Number of Iranian Military Interventions, by Primary Activity Type (1979–2018)

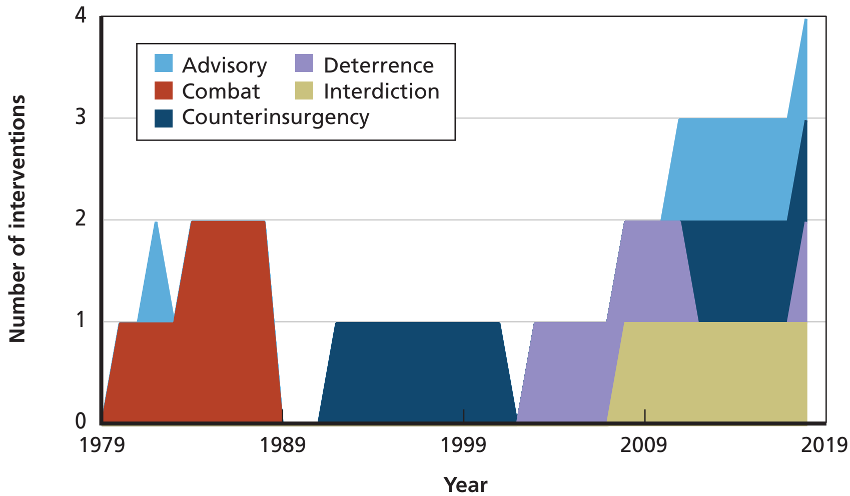


- the primary activity undertaken in the antipiracy naval operations off the Horn of Africa is interdiction
- the rocket launches into Iraq prior to 2001 and in the Golan since 2018 are part of deterrence missions.

Figure 3.5 shows these interventions grouped by activity type over time.

Although Iran has not been engaged in large-scale combat interventions since the end of the Iran-Iraq War, Iranian forces have been engaged in more-limited kinetic operations abroad for much of the past three decades, from limited missile strikes in the 1990s into Iraq to the more-robust recent advisory and counterinsurgency missions in Syria and Iraq. We have coded interventions according to primary activity types. Therefore, in the Syrian case, for example, Iranian forces

Figure 3.5
Number of Iranian Military Interventions over Time, by Primary Activity Type (1979–2018)

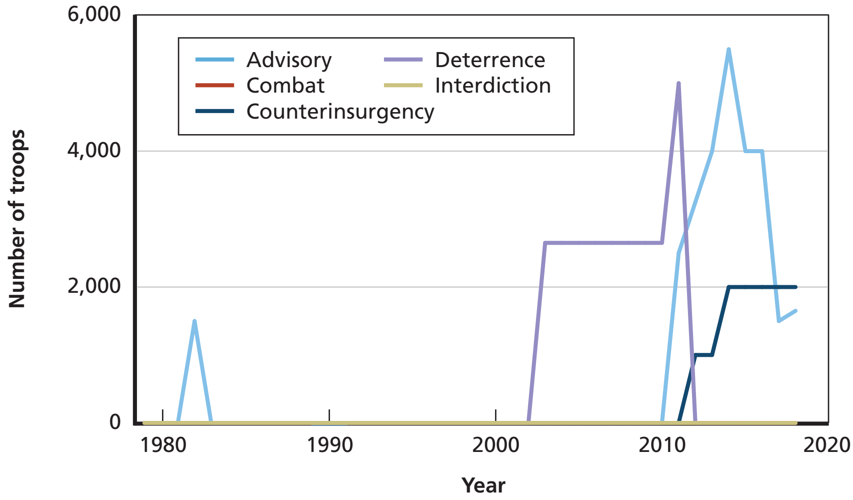


NOTE: The count of interventions by activity type are stacked on top of one another in this figure. For example, there was one interdiction intervention, one counterinsurgency intervention, and one advisory mission in 2015. It is also important to note that although we coded the overall primary activity of the Iranian intervention in Iraq post-2003 as deterrence (and this is reflected in the count in Figure 3.4), we noted in our annual data that the nature of this intervention shifted to a counterinsurgency focus after 2012, which is reflected in this figure.

were also engaged in combat operations; however, their primary activity was advisory. If we look at the scale of the forces committed to these activities, however, we have already seen in Figure 3.2 that Iran's combat intervention in the Iran-Iraq War is much larger than any other intervention that Iran has undertaken. We therefore again remove this intervention from Figure 3.6 to better see trends in the size of forces involved in other activity types.

Excluding the massive commitment of forces to the Iran-Iraq War combat intervention, Iranian ground forces have been deployed to conduct a wide variety of activities, with no clearly dominant or larger activity. Iranian forces committed to advisory, deterrence, and counterinsurgency missions over the past two decades have been roughly similar in scale, at around a few thousand troops. The antipiracy inter-

Figure 3.6
Number of Iranian Ground Troops Involved in Military Interventions, Excluding Iran-Iraq War, by Activity Type (1979–2018)



NOTE: This figure excludes air- and naval-only interventions (i.e., in which ground forces were not deployed to foreign territory) and the Iran-Iraq War because of its scale. It is also important to note that although we coded the overall primary activity of the Iranian intervention in post-2003 Iraq as deterrence (and this is reflected in the count in Figure 3.4), we noted in our annual data that the nature of this intervention shifted to a counterinsurgency focus after 2012, which is reflected in this figure.

diction mission in the Gulf of Aden involves primarily naval assets and therefore does not register in Figure 3.6.

Conclusion

Iran is one of four countries singled out in the U.S. NSS and NDS as posing a critical threat to U.S. interests. However, in terms of military interventions, Iran's track record pales in comparison with that of China, Russia, and even North Korea. Excluding the Iran-Iraq War, Iran's record of military interventions is even more modest than lesser Cold War U.S. adversaries, such as Cuba and Libya. Iran has been involved in a limited number of military interventions since 1979, typically with not more than one or two ongoing at a time. Similarly, the limited geographic scope of Iranian interventions (limited to the Middle East) stands in contrast to that of other U.S. adversaries. It is, however, noteworthy that Iran has modestly expanded its military interventions since 2003 and appears to have increased the rate of success of its interventions. In the following two chapters, we examine two case studies, both from the post-2003 period: the Syrian civil war (2011–present) and the counter-ISIS operations in Iraq (2014–present).

CHAPTER FOUR

Case Study: Iranian Intervention in the Syrian Civil War (2011–Present)

In this case study, we assess key hypotheses identified in Chapters Two and Three by evaluating six specific factors that may have affected the likelihood of an Iranian intervention in Syria in response to the outbreak of the civil war in 2011.[1] We selected this case study for several reasons. First, despite a small number of cases, our statistical review (described in Chapter Three) of Iranian interventions since it became a U.S. adversary in 1979 revealed trends and patterns of behavior that shed light on how Tehran thinks about interventions and plans for them in a holistic manner. Notably, the Iranian decision to intervene in Syria (and how it has chosen to prosecute the campaign) appears to deviate from the typical Iranian historical pattern. Indeed, following the Iran-Iraq War, Iran has seldom (if ever) deployed conventional ground forces in combat.

Instead, Iran has largely chosen to conduct small-scale and targeted airstrikes and engage in advisory missions (training, advising, and equipping its partners). Iran's decision to put conventional combat troops on the ground in Syria was a departure from this modus operandi, thus constituting the only example not predicted by the data. Although the Syrian case may remain an exception rather than the rule in Iranian military interventions, especially given how divisive the

---

1 As discussed in additional detail in this chapter, these six factors were selected from a list of ten potential factors affecting the decision to intervene because they were judged most germane to this specific case. For details on how the list of potential factors was derived, see Chapter Two.

intervention has been within the regime and populace, understanding how the drivers behind this exceptional case differed from more-typical interventions may improve the ability of the U.S. Army to respond should Tehran decide to approach its military interventions differently in the future than it has over the past four decades.

The six potential factors examined in this case study as drivers of the Iranian decision to intervene include (1) regional power balance and stability, (2) alliance or partnership with host, (3) co-identity group populations in host, (4) national status concerns, (5) domestic politics and legitimacy, and (6) adversary military capabilities. Finally, we conclude with a summary of this analysis, highlighting which factors appear to be best supported and least supported by evidence from the case.

Background

In March 2011, several regions in Syria began to witness protests in the context of popular uprisings brewing across the region, a political moment known collectively as the Arab Spring. The protests in Syria initially flared as grievances in opposition to the rule of Bashar al-Assad, who had governed the country since 2000, when his father Hafez al-Assad (the founder of the Ba'athist Syrian Arab Republic) died. Soon, these protests in marginalized and underdeveloped regions turned into countrywide uprisings.[2] Faced with a growing threat to his power, Assad began to crack down on his opponents in Deraa, Damascus (the capital), and major cities, such as Homs and Aleppo.[3] The government imposed sieges, beginning in Deraa, on towns and cities and began to kill unarmed civilians.[4] The unrest devolved into an armed

2 Human Rights Council, "Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the Situation of Human Rights in the Syrian Arab Republic," United Nations General Assembly, A/HRC/18/53, September 15, 2011, p. 8.

3 Human Rights Watch, *We Live as in War: Crackdown on Protestors in the Governate of Homs*, New York, November 2011; Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Coordinated Chemical Attacks on Aleppo," February 13, 2017.

4 Human Rights Council, 2011, p. 8.

conflict that would carry on through the time of this writing and lead to hundreds of thousands of casualties, millions of displaced people, tens of thousands of arbitrary detentions and enforced disappearances, and innumerable other mass atrocities, human rights violations, and violations of international law.[5] During this conflict, the United States, Turkey, and members of the Gulf Cooperation Council would provide support to the opposition in Syria, while Iran and (later) Russia assisted Assad.

Two years prior to the beginning of the events of the Arab Spring, Tehran, a key Syrian ally, had experienced similar unrests following the 2009 presidential elections and had successfully crushed the opposition.[6] When Assad started to suppress domestic dissent in spring 2011, Tehran began the first of three phases in its Syrian campaign: providing relatively low levels of materiel and human support to the Assad government.[7] The Iranian efforts were covert at first and were largely focused in an advisory capacity. Although the exact nature and degree of Iranian support during this early period has not become completely clear from the open-source reporting, its phase one ground footprint and operations do not appear to have deviated significantly from Tehran's typical, post-1979 modus operandi.[8] In May 2012, the United Nations Panel of Experts on Iran issued a report outlining the scope of Iranian arms shipments to Syria.[9] Iranian support, provided by air and by ground via Iraq, consisted of training, communications monitor-

---

5 Human Rights Council, 2011, pp. 20–24. See also Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2019: Syria, Events of 2018*, New York, 2019.

6 Robert F. Worth and Nazila Fathi, "Protests Flare in Tehran as Opposition Disputes Vote," *New York Times*, June 13, 2009; Human Rights Watch, "Iran: Halt the Crackdown," June 19, 2009.

7 Simon Tisdall, "Iran Helping Syrian Regime Crack Down on Protesters, Say Diplomats," *The Guardian*, May 8, 2011.

8 Louis Charbonneau, "Exclusive: Iran Flouts U.S. Sanctions, Sends Arms to Syria: Panel," Reuters, May 16, 2012.

9 Charbonneau, 2012.

ing and interception technology, and military equipment.[10] However, as the suppression turned into an all-out war, and one in which the opposition was (at times) winning, Iran gradually increased its support for Assad.

By 2012, Iran had started the second phase of its involvement in Syria, when it began to dispatch ground troops to the theater. In May 2012, the IRGC—the paramilitary branch of the Iranian military in charge of the country's regional activities—appears to have first admitted to having deployed its forces in Syria.[11] Initially, the Iranian contingent was primarily composed of the IRGC's specialized units.[12] Tehran increased its direct and indirect (via Hezbollah) support for Assad throughout 2013.[13] By early 2014, reports indicated that Iran had "several 'hundred' military specialists, including senior commanders from the Quds Force," the special unit of the IRGC led by Major General Qassem Soleimani, in Syria. According to some news accounts, 60 to 70 Quds Force commanders were reportedly present on the ground at any given time, primarily to manage logistics and gather intelligence.[14] The final number of troops deployed in Syria was the result of bargaining within the regime, with President Hassan Rouhani advocating for fewer troops deployed to avoid stressing the then ongoing nuclear talks and with Soleimani advocating for greater numbers, ultimately settling on a compromise.[15] At the same time, Tehran reportedly sent Falaq-1 and Falaq-2 rocket launchers to Syria, with "an increase in use."[16]

---

10 Michael R. Gordon, "Iran Supplying Syrian Military via Iraqi Airspace," *New York Times*, September 4, 2012.

11 Ian Black, "Iran Confirms It Has Forces in Syria and Will Take Military Action If Pushed," *The Guardian*, September 16, 2012.

12 Black, 2012.

13 Louis Charboneau, "Exclusive: Iran Steps Up Weapons Lifeline to Assad," Reuters, March 14, 2013.

14 Ruth Sherlock, "Iran Boosts Support to Syria," *The Telegraph*, February 21, 2014.

15 Sherlock, 2014.

16 Jonathan Saul and Parisa Hafezi, "Iran Boosts Military Support in Syria to Bolster Assad," Reuters, February 20, 2014.

Throughout early 2014, Tehran officially continued to deny its presence on the ground in Syria because of the campaign's unpopularity; this would change, however, with the rise of ISIS.[17] Soon, Iran's role in Syria became undeniable as the country saw its first casualties in combat.[18] The expansion of the Islamic State thus marked the start of the third phase of Tehran's campaign in Syria, which now included a counterinsurgency mission and a persistent, increasingly publicized IRGC presence on the battlefield. Iran now sought to justify what had become a divisive war at home and abroad, and the rise of ISIS in summer 2014 helped provide Tehran with a domestically popular rationale for its presence in Syria as the emerging threat raised concerns about the group's ability to capture territory and grow its network in Iran's backyard.[19] At the same time, Assad's repeated use of chemical weapons against civilians and other mass atrocities made it difficult for Tehran to stand behind its support for Assad, forcing Iranian officials to question in public the authenticity of the reports and whether the attacks could truly be traced back to Assad.[20]

Nevertheless, as the combat continued and Iran became more embedded in the fabric of the pro-Assad forces, Tehran also deployed its conventional military force, known as the Artesh, to the theater.[21] These conventional ground warfighters included Artesh rangers and the Saberin forces (the Artesh sniper unit). However, according to senior Artesh leadership, no unit was deployed whole cloth to Syria; instead, "a number of personnel from all units" were sent to operate

---

17 Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, "Death Toll Among Iran's Forces in Syrian War Passes 1,000," Reuters, November 22, 2016.

18 Sharafedin, 2016.

19 Sharafedin, 2016. For additional details on Iranian and other regional popular threat perceptions of ISIS in fall 2014, see Zogby Research Services, *Today's Middle East: Pressures and Challenges*, Washington, D.C., November 2014.

20 Sarah Almukhtar, "Most Chemical Attacks in Syria Get Little Attention. Here Are 34 Confirmed Cases," *New York Times*, April 13, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2017; and Human Rights Watch, *Attacks on Ghouta: Analysis of Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria*, New York, September 2013.

21 "Amir Pourdasatan tashrih kar joz'eyat-e hozoor-e Artesh-e Iran dar Araq va Surieh," *Fararu*, January 21, 2018.

with the Quds Force and other forces.[22] As Artesh commander Ahmad Reza Pourdastan described,

> Our [troops] did not do anything independently. The Quds Force position was there and our forces were assigned to the Quds Force position, meaning that the Quds Force is responsible for training in Syria and Iraq and our [troops] work under the supervision of the Quds Force.[23]

Put another way, Iranian conventional forces were augmenting more-elite units that specialize in advise-and-assist missions.

Pourdastan also explained why the Artesh had not been deployed to Syria in equal numbers to the IRGC, noting "We do not see Da'esh as sizable and significant enough to deploy an entire military unit. Our main adversary is the United States and we prepare ourselves adequately [to match them]."[24] In addition to advancing the regime's objectives in Syria, Pourdastan noted that Artesh forces had been deployed to the country so that "they could benefit from the training and tactical and operational environment and to increase the operational capabilities of the Islamic Republic's military to confront the real adversary, which is undoubtedly America."[25] This statement appears to reflect an Iranian preference for the tactical and operational proficiency gained in real-world deployments over simulated trainings.

At the same time, Iran began to leverage its proxies, particularly Lebanese Hezbollah, in the conflict and, later, created new foreign fighter units to increase manpower. In particular, the Iranian-supported Afghan Fatemiyoun and Pakistani Zaynabiyoun joined the

---

22 "Joz'eyat-e dargiri-ye kolah sabzha-ye Artesh ba terrorist-ha dar Halab/ Halakat-e 200 takfiri," *Tasnim News*, April 12, 2016.

23 "Amir Pourdasatan tashrih kar joz'eyat-e hozoor-e Artesh-e Iran dar Araq va Surieh," 2018.

24 "Joz'eyat-e dargiri-ye kolah sabzha-ye Artesh ba terrorist-ha dar Halab/ Halakat-e 200 takfiri," 2016.

25 "Kolah sabzha-ye Artesh tebq-e kodam qanun be Surieh raftand?" *Tasnim News*, April 23, 2016.

efforts by 2014.[26] The following year, the Russian Federation publicly joined the conflict when it began its air campaign in Syria. Moscow's air cover to the "Axis of Resistance," composed of Tehran, Damascus, and Hezbollah, helped cement Assad's rule.[27]

The Syrian civil war was the first and most significant instance of an Iranian ground intervention in combat since the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988. Reuters reported in October 2015 that hundreds of Iranian troops had been deployed in Syria in the last ten days of September to partake in a major ground offensive backed by the Russian air force.[28] In a departure from the previous four years, Iranian troops were reportedly deployed to participate in operations and no longer mostly operating in advisory and support capacities.[29] That same year, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that an estimated 7,000 Guards and the IRGC volunteer militias known as Basijis (including the Fatehin forces, the Basij special operations forces) were operating in Syria, in addition to the estimated thousands of non-Iranian Shia fighters trained and deployed by Iran.[30]

The Syrian conflict was also the first instance of Tehran simultaneously deploying both the IRGC and the Artesh in combined operations since the Iran-Iraq War. Unlike that conflict, however, the Syrian civil war did not result from a foreign attack on Iranian soil and did not threaten Iranian sovereignty, national unity, and/or territorial integrity. On the contrary, the events in Syria during and immediately following the Arab Spring did not directly affect Iranian security, because the two countries did not share a border. However, Syria presented both a challenge and an opportunity for Tehran. On the one hand, Iran was concerned about the collapse of the Syrian state, which it believed could lead to broader regional instability and eventual spillover onto its

---

[26] Clarke and Smyth, 2017, p. 15

[27] Katz, 2018.

[28] Laila Bassam, "Assad Allies, Including Iranians, Prepare Ground Attack in Syria: Sources," Reuters, October 1, 2015.

[29] Bassam, 2015.

[30] Sam Dagher and Asa Fitch, "Iran Expands Role in Syria in Conjunction with Russia's Airstrikes," *Wall Street Journal*, October 2, 2015.

territory.[31] Additionally, the potential fall of Assad, one of the Islamic Republic's only Arab allies (whose support during the Iran-Iraq War was critical), and his replacement with a government less friendly toward Tehran, would constitute a strategic loss for a country that had long struggled with international and regional isolation.[32] It would also create a gap in Iran's ability to resupply Lebanese Hezbollah.[33] On the other hand, according to Iran, pressuring ISIS militants in Syria would help prevent the ISIS threat from growing in neighboring Iraq and spilling into Iran, although evidence supporting this claim remains thin.[34] Moreover, Syria presented an opportunity to expose Iranian troops to combat experience and increase their battlefield effectiveness while growing cohesion between the two forces, which have often been disjointed because of different cultures, doctrines, and standard operating procedures.[35]

Factors to Be Assessed

In the sections that follow, we assess previously identified hypotheses regarding where, when, and why Iran intervenes by analyzing the factors that most directly affected Tehran's decision to become involved in Syria in 2011. Table 4.1 summarizes this assessment. Ultimately, the process identified four factors as particularly important in this case, which we discuss in greater length in the following sections: (1) regional power balance and stability, (2) alliance or partnership with host, (3) co-identity group populations in host, and (4) external threats providing the impetus for Iran to use the Syrian conflict as

---

31 Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 2015.

32 Karim Sadjadpour, "Iran's Unwavering Support to Assad's Syria," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 6, No. 8, August 2013.

33 Sadjadpour, 2013.

34 Ali Khamenei, "Bayaniat dar didar-e khanevadeh-haye shohada-ye haftom-e Tir va Jam'ee az khanevadeh-haye shohada-ye modafe'e haram," Khamenei.ir, June 25, 2016.

35 "Amir Pourdasatan tashrih kar joz'eyat-e hozoor-e Artesh-e Iran dar Araq va Surieh," 2018.

Table 4.1
Summary of Potential Factors Affecting Likelihood of Iranian Intervention in Syria (2011–Present)

Category	Factor Name	Case-Specific Relevance
Geopolitics	National status	Medium
	Regional power balance	High
	External threat to sovereignty	Direct threats are low but factor is indirectly high in providing incentive to train and improve military
	Alliance or partnership with host	High
Domestic	Domestic politics and legitimacy	Medium
	Economic interests	Low
	Co-identity group populations in host	High
Ideational	Iranian leadership and personality	Low
	Ideology	Low
Enablers	Military capabilities	Low

an opportunity to refine its military capabilities. Two additional factors were identified as being of medium importance, and we discuss them briefly at the end of this section: (1) national status concerns and (2) domestic politics and legitimacy. Finally, four potential factors (military enablers, economic interests, ideology, and adversary leadership and personality) were assessed to be of lower importance; these are addressed as well but in less detail in this case study. As we survey these factors, it is important to bear in mind that some of these factors are closely linked, thus leading to overlapping discussions in several areas.

According to our analysis, four factors played a less important role in shaping Iran's decision to intervene in Syria; these potential factors are not discussed in detail in the remainder of this case study. Here, we briefly outline why. Although external threat played a greater role in shaping Iran's thinking in Syria after the rise of ISIS, this was not directly a significant contributing factor to the original Iranian decision to intervene in the conflict, given the existence of a physical buffer

between the two countries. In fact, as we describe in the following sections, Iran welcomes some degree of insecurity in Syria. However, other external threats that Iran faced gave the country an incentive to use the Syrian conflict as an opportunity to train and improve its military forces, as we will discuss later.

With respect to economic interests, Syria for the majority of the conflict's duration has been more of an economic burden than boon for Iran, which had to commit significant resources to help secure Assad. However, Iran has gradually started to try to monetize its support for Assad by taking ownership of reconstruction projects in the war-torn country, particularly with the U.S. reimposition of sanctions starting in 2018. Iran also arguably intervened in Syria in part to lessen the cost of its support for Lebanese Hezbollah by using land routes to Lebanon and the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, economic gains were not a key incentive driving Iranian involvement in Syria for most of the conflict. Neither were changes in Iranian military capabilities: Iran has possessed the capability to undertake an intervention along the lines of what it did in Syria for some time.

Finally, ideational factors were less significant in shaping Iran's Syrian intervention than other geostrategic and domestic considerations. Although Iran remains a revolutionary actor, driven in part by ideology, its decisions to intervene militarily have largely been determined by pragmatic geopolitical considerations. Ideology, by contrast, has generally served as a means of rallying domestic constituents (chiefly recruiting volunteers in Iran to fight in conflicts) and galvanizing partners (particularly nonstate partners). Similarly, although key figures within Iran have certainly shaped the decision to intervene in conflicts, the Syrian case in particular demonstrates a systemwide bargaining game shaping the decision to intervene.

Factor 1: Regional Power Balance

The primary driver behind Iran's decision to intervene in Syria lies in its desire to shape the regional power balance to its advantage. Iran's Syrian intervention to secure regional power balance was mostly aimed

at maintaining the status quo and protecting the Iranian position. That it would also advance its strategic position seems like an unintended or unanticipated side effect. Iran's tolerance for instability in nearby countries varies depending on the proximity of those countries to its border, the level of ethnic and religious population overlap, and, as a result, the impact on its security.

Although Tehran seeks to avoid chaos in neighboring countries, such as Afghanistan and Iraq, where turmoil and insecurity have direct implications for Iranian security, that is not necessarily the case in Syria.[36] Syria does not share borders with Iran, and its security does not directly affect Iran's security. Hence, Iran can not only afford some level of volatility but also benefits from managed instability, which provides it with a degree of presence and influence in the country.[37] As in Yemen and Lebanon, Iran sees fragile states in its neighborhood as an opportunity for growth.[38] A highly capable sovereign is unlikely to cede influence to Iran, but a state under threat, such as the Assad regime, might cede authority to Iran in return for its backing. However, Tehran has also recognized with the rise of ISIS that failed states can present a challenge to its security. Consequently, Iran pursues a policy of managed instability.

Iran intervened in Syria in pursuit of two key objectives. First, Tehran wished to create and maintain a favorable balance of power in the region and, by doing so, preserve its access and influence in Syria, which enables its access and influence in Lebanon and Gaza. Second, Iran sought to stabilize its immediate neighborhood by ensuring Assad's survival and, later, containing ISIS in Syria. For Tehran, confining the ISIS threat in Syria would decrease chances of spillover into Iraq and, ultimately, Iran. Syria in general and Assad in particular were key to these endeavors. The Islamic Republic framed its intervention in Syria primarily along two lines: counterterrorism and the protection of Shia holy sites in that country, both of which also are core

---

36 Juneau, 2020, p. 28.

37 Juneau, 2020, p. 28.

38 Juneau, 2020, p. 28.

parts of the Iranian narrative surrounding the Iranian intervention in Iraq.

The significance of the Assad regime's fate to Iran's regional power status can be traced to the start of the Islamic Republic: Since 1979, the Assads' Syria has been the only Arab country in the Middle East to consistently side with Iran in regional conflict.[39] During the Iran-Iraq War, Tehran felt isolated as its Arab neighbors either sided with Saddam Hussein or refused to take a position on the conflict.[40] Damascus was the exception.[41] Damascus did not directly intervene on Iran's behalf, but it diverted Iraqi forces from their war effort against Iran by reinforcing Syria's border with Iraq, benefiting Tehran. Hafez al-Assad also facilitated the Islamic Republic's creation of Hezbollah in Lebanon during the Lebanese Civil War by allowing 500 Guards to go through Syrian territory to deploy in the Bekka Valley.[42] To be clear, President Assad did this out of self-interest, wanting Iran's support in imposing costs on Israel from neighboring Lebanon, but the effect was to bolster Iran's position. Since then, from Tehran's perspective, Syria has remained the Islamic Republic's only state ally in a largely hostile region; the loss of a friendly central government in Damascus was seen by Iran as the equivalent of a rival gaining an important ally.[43] Hence, the fall of the Assad regime and the potential advent of a different (and unfriendly or even potentially hostile) government in Syria threatened a blow to the influence of the Islamic Republic in the region. Given Assad's importance to Iran's regional position, Tehran saw it as critical to support him in the early days of the war. Later, as the cost of conflict increased for Iran, Iranian officials began to contemplate a future

---

[39] Mohsen Milani, "Why Tehran Won't Abandon Assad(ism)," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 4, 2013, pp. 80–83.

[40] Milani, 2013, pp. 80–81.

[41] Juneau, 2020, p. 30.

[42] Milani, 2013, p. 81.

[43] "Ma be Surieh razmandeh-e nabordeh-im/Da'esh bara-ye Iran tashkil shodeh ast na Surieh," Iranian Students News Agency, October 5, 2016.

Damascus, whose allegiance would still lie with Tehran but without Assad at its head.[44]

In addition to Assad's centrality to Iranian interests in the region, Syria was of strategic importance to Iran because of its geographic location. Syria sits between Iran's western neighbor Iraq and Lebanon, where the Islamic Republic's chief proxy, Hezbollah, is based. Having a friendly government in Damascus, which would allow Tehran to access Hezbollah via its territory, would help facilitate and cut the costs of supplying the group.[45] Although it is possible for Iran to equip Hezbollah through several means, a land corridor is appealing in that it provides Iran with contiguous territory rather than islands of influence. As far back as the immediate aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the Iranians saw Syria as an important bridge to the Lebanese Shia.[46]

Moreover, Iran saw Syria as one of the only Arab states "resisting" its chief adversary, Israel.[47] In fact, according to some Iranian sources, the West wished to negotiate with Syria, offering concessions in exchange for Assad's help in containing Iran in the region (vis-à-vis Israel), which he declined, proving that this alliance was as durable as it was strong.[48] Given Syria's position as a neighbor of Israel, Assad's invitation to deploy troops to Syria was also viewed by Tehran as a low-cost opportunity for Iran to establish itself in its chief adversary's proximity, enabling it to deter and harass the country (and possibly the United States) more effectively. For example, Iranian forces have reportedly used their bases in Syria to strike Israeli positions in the Golan Heights with rockets.[49] In short, from Tehran's perspective, continued access to Syrian territory was vital to maintaining Iranian influence and the bal-

---

[44] Juneau, 2020, p. 30.

[45] Juneau, 2020, p. 30.

[46] Milani, 2013, p. 80.

[47] "Aghaz-e bohran-e Surieh be revayat-e Shahid Hossein Hamedani," *Al-Alam*, December 26, 2016.

[48] "Aghaz-e bohran-e Surieh be revayat-e Shahid Hossein Hamedani," 2016.

[49] International Crisis Group, "Golan Heights and South/West Syria," accessed June 12, 2019; Isabel Kershner, "Iran Fires Rockets into Golan Heights from Syria, Israelis Say," *New York Times*, May 9, 2018.

ance of power in the region. If Iran could establish a second front for firing increasingly precise rockets against Israel (i.e., from the Golan), that capability combined with the existing threat posed by Hezbollah against Israel's northern border would provide Iranian proxies a greater chance of overwhelming Israel's layered missile defense system. Iran may have calculated that this would deter Israel from striking the Iranian homeland, since doing so would risk a two-front rocket barrage that would impose civilian casualties.

Iran had entered the war hoping to keep Syria on its side and avoid the balance of power tilting in its adversaries' favor. But securing Syria as an Iranian ally also meant increasing Iran's strategic depth.[50] Tehran demonstrated its ability to project military power beyond its borders on a larger scale than it had at any time since the Iran-Iraq War and to contribute to turning the tides of what seemed like an unwinnable war. Although a detailed analysis of the role of proxies in adversaries' interventions is beyond the scope of this report, it must be noted that Iran's nonstate partners played a key role in the country's decision to intervene, because they are a significant force in tilting the regional balance of power in Tehran's favor.

In particular, land access to Hezbollah and the provision of assistance to the group as it became involved in Syria factored into Iran's decision to intervene in Syria. Iran's network of foreign fighters in Syria was also instrumental in making sure that any conflict between Iran and Israel (and its ally, the United States) would not remain contained, dragging in other forces from the region.[51] Iran creates or supports nonstate clients in countries of strategic importance for its interests, hoping to ultimately have them present a real force against unfriendly governments or within the political system and security forces. This practice further serves Iran's interest of projecting power and shaping the regional balance of power to its advantage. The Syrian intervention allowed Iran to create new groups (including the Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun, fighters of Afghan and Pakistani descent) and consoli-

50 "Aghaz-e bohran-e Surieh be revayat-e Shahid Hossein Hamedani," 2016.

51 Ben Hubbard, Isabel Kershner, and Anne Barnard, "Iran, Deeply Embedded in Syria, Expands 'Axis of Resistance,'" *New York Times*, February 19, 2018.

date existing ones in neighboring countries while strengthening its ties with them.[52] It was also instrumental in providing these proxies with the opportunity to become battle tested.

Factor 2: Alliance or Partnership with Host

Iran's historical alliance with the Assad family also played a critical role in shaping its decision to intervene in Syria. The alliance-with-host factor came into play in Iran's Syrian intervention in three phases. During phase one, Iran made the initial decision to intervene in 2011 to secure its ally, one of the only Arab countries in the Middle East to have consistently sided with Iran since 1979, as discussed earlier. By 2012, a second phase had begun, in which Iran (like much of the international community) saw Assad as declining fast. Tehran began to question whether the costs of maintaining him in place outweighed the benefits. As a result, Iranian decisionmakers were exploring alternatives that would allow them to keep Syria on their side without necessarily committing to Assad, because his fate seemed increasingly sealed. At the same time, Iran was largely handcuffed; it had already paid important reputational costs to support Assad, and it could not find viable alternatives to secure its interests in Syria. However, the combination of the rise of ISIS and the Russian intervention in 2015 ushered in the third phase of Iranian intervention in support of Assad: Having beaten all odds and lasted in power, Assad was there to stay, and fewer governments were calling on him to step down. Some had even taken steps to normalize relations again.[53]

---

52 Raja Abdulrahim and Benoit Faucon, "Iran Moves to Cement Its Influence in Syria," *Wall Street Journal*, March 26, 2019; Ahmad Shuja Jamal, *The Fatemiyoun Army: Reintegration into Afghan Society*, Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, March 2019, p. 3; Ali Alfoneh, "Using Syria as a Training Ground: The Case of the Pakistani Zeinabiyoun Brigade," Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, July 17, 2018; Ali Alfoneh, "Tehran's Shia Foreign Legions," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 30, 2018.

53 Kinda Makieh, "UAE Reopens Syria Embassy in Boost for Assad," Reuters, December 27, 2018.

Iran's hopes of a quick intervention to secure Assad without much international scrutiny evaporated fast as the unrest turned into a bloody civil war and the conflict progressed. Hence, after a short-lived phase one of strong commitment to Assad, the Iranian involvement there became less committed to keeping Assad in place than to maintaining Damascus in Tehran's corner—regardless of whether the dictator stayed in power. The alliance-with-host factor that had strongly influenced the original invention decision arguably faced its greatest durability test when news reports surfaced in 2013 that Assad had used chemical weapons in the conflict on a large scale, and the international community's increasing uproar made it appear that his days were numbered. By then, what Iran had thought would be a quick campaign to rapidly crush the opposition—as had been its experience domestically in 2009—risked morphing into a quagmire from which Tehran could no longer escape.[54] World leaders, including then U.S. President Barack Obama, called on Assad to step down.[55] For Iran, the main task was now not necessarily to keep Assad afloat but to make sure any transition of power would be in line with Iranian interests. It is also worth recalling that Russia had yet to enter the conflict with airpower on Assad's behalf, so Iran and Hezbollah were the only forces providing manpower contributions (the latter covertly) to defend the regime's position.

By 2013, it was reported that Iran and Hezbollah were cultivating a network of militias in Syria to protect their interests in the event of Assad's fall.[56] Indeed, the exhibition of this strategic flexibility in phase two perhaps suggests that the alliance-with-host factor may have been a weaker driver than face value first suggests, truly reflecting a need to protect a historical geostrategic marriage of convenience rather than an enduring, long-term ally, such as Lebanese Hezbollah. For Iran, its

---

[54] Mohsen Milani, 2013, p. 84.

[55] Macon Phillips, "President Obama: 'The Future of Syria Must Be Determined by Its People, but President Bashar al-Assad Is Standing in Their Way,'" White House, August 18, 2011.

[56] Karen DeYoung and Joby Warrick, "Iran, Hezbollah Build Militia Networks in Syria in Event That Assad Falls, Officials Say," *Washington Post*, February 10, 2013.

strategy in the conflict still sought an outcome that would preserve Assad's rule. But Iran had now also devised a plan B in case Assad could not maintain his grip on power, as seemed increasingly likely: the preservation of Iranian interests through nonstate partners in Syria. As the U.S. Treasury Department's then Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David Cohen put it, these forces (known as Jaish fighters) are "essentially an Iran-Hezbollah joint venture."[57] The unit, Treasury Department officials noted, was modeled after Iran's Basij organization.[58] Identifying and cultivating potential nonstate partners would afford Iran the influence it sought in Syria while allowing it to gradually decrease the number of its troops in the conflict, thus returning to its usual modus operandi. A major obstacle was that Iran could not identify an obvious viable successor to Assad, who would prioritize the Iran-Syria alliance, allow Tehran to operate in the country and preserve its line to Hezbollah, and help deter and harass Israel.[59]

At this juncture, alliance considerations weighed heavily on Iran's calculus regarding whether to remain in the fight. Iran had effectively boxed itself in: If it left Syria and Assad collapsed, it would risk losing a significant ally and a critical lifeline to Hezbollah. It would also be viewed as a weak state and would have paid to support Assad in blood, treasure, and reputation only to suffer a humiliating defeat. If Iran stayed in Syria, it did not have any viable alternative candidates for power whose allegiance to Tehran would help secure Syria's alliance with the Islamic Republic and who could gain popular support and rise to power. From Iran's perspective, continuing to fight to keep Assad in place was thus the only real path forward, although it did not come without its shortcomings, including continued use of assets and reputational costs.

As noted previously, ISIS did not factor into Iran's initial decision to intervene. However, ISIS did strengthen the rationale for maintaining the alliance and supporting Assad later. For Iran, the rise of ISIS was an immense security challenge in Iraq, but it was an opportunity

[57] DeYoung and Warrick, 2013.

[58] DeYoung and Warrick, 2013.

[59] Juneau, 2020, p. 30.

in Syria. It allowed Iran to present itself at home and abroad not as the backer of a brutal dictator in a civil war caused by his crackdown of a peaceful uprising, but rather as a responsible international partner in a global counterterrorism mission.[60] Assad, in the Iranian narrative, was crushing terrorists, not political opponents, and if he lost that battle, terrorists would take the reins of the country and lead to even more chaos in the region. This was expressed in Iranian and Hezbollah messaging that framed their interventions as fighting *takfiris* (Sunni Muslims who claim other Muslims are nonbelievers) while the West abetted their rise. The ISIS threat thus revitalized Iran's support for Assad.

Another significant boost for Iran's support for Assad came when Russia entered the conflict in 2015. Moscow lent Assad and his backers critical air capabilities and helped deisolate Tehran thanks to its weight on the international stage. The conflict began to turn in Assad's (and, consequently, Iran's) favor. Assad's rule proved more resilient than many (including in Iran) had anticipated. After the battle of Mosul, Iran redirected some of its ground forces to Syria.[61] Having defied expectations and effectively secured Assad against all odds, Iran's intervention was now geared toward renormalizing the dictator. Iran began to invest in Syria's reconstruction plans (also driven by economic incentives, especially in light of the United States reimposing sanctions on the country following President Donald Trump's inauguration in January 2017).[62]

That said, Russia's intervention also presented challenges for Iran. Although it helped secure their mutual client's position and thus advanced a shared Russian-Iranian interest, it also presented a scenario in which Russia would be competing with Iran for influence in Syria. Assad owes his continued rule to both partners, but Russian and Ira-

---

60 For example, see "Hadad-e Adel: Agar Iran Nabud Iraq va Surieh be dast-e Daesh mioftadand," *Tasnim News*, April 23, 2019; "Agar be Surieh komak nemikardim, qatan jang be dakhel-e keshvar keshideh mishod/asnad-e ma neshan midahad America Daesh ra ijad kard," *Mashregh News*, September 27, 2017; and "Iran dar khatar-e jedi ast/Daesh bayad dar Surieh va Iraq mahar shaved," *Mashregh News*, June 1, 2015.

61 Majara-ye gofteh nashodeh az bombaran-e mavaze'-e DAESH tavasot-e jangadeha-ye Artesh," *Tasnim News*, September 21, 2017.

62 Sinan Hatahet, *Russia and Iran: Economic Influence in Syria*, London: Chatham House, March 2019.

nian interests only partially align in Syria. Iran is interested in establishing drone and missile bases inside Syria from which to challenge Israel. Russia's interest is in securing its warmwater port at Tartus in the Mediterranean, keeping Hmemeim air base as a site for its aircraft and to demonstrate the capabilities of its S-300 and S-400 air and missile defense systems, and benefiting from future reconstruction. Moscow does not have an interest in Syria and Israel engaging in a military conflict, which Iran's activities make more likely. Despite this difference, Iranian and Russian cooperation in Syria has largely held, with the two powers setting aside this key difference for the primary objective of maintaining the regime.

The fear of Assad's collapse and the emergence of new leaders who are less sympathetic to Iran was a key driver behind Iran's initial decision to intervene in Syria. Soon, however, Iran would display flexibility by planning for contingency rather than seeking to keep Assad in power at all cost: Assad may fall, but Syria would have to remain in friendly hands. When Assad kept his grip on power against all odds, and with Russia now throwing its weight behind the dictator, Iran was able not just to secure a friendly Syria but also the continuation of Assad.

Factor 3: Co-Identity Group Populations in Host

Iran almost exclusively deploys troops in host countries with which it shares a significant co-identity group population: A few states in the region have strong ethnic ties to the Iranian population, while many countries have a Shia minority, thus explaining why Iran's interventions remain regional and do not seem to expand beyond its neighborhood. As noted in Chapter Three, our data suggest all Iranian ground interventions have taken place in theaters and countries where the country has some co-identity group populations (the advisory mission in the Iran-Iraq War, the Lebanon War, Iranian forces in Iraq post-Saddam, and the Syrian civil war). Such ethnic and religious ties raise the stakes for Iran and increase the probability of intervention, all else equal. The country's regional clout is highly dependent on its co-identity groups,

which form the basis of its network of nonstate partners (one of Iran's only formidable security assets, making up for its lack of adequate conventional capabilities) and ties to governments across the region.[63] As a result, the presence of groups with ethnic or religious ties to Iran serves as an important factor shaping the Iranian decision to intervene in conflicts and affects how the country intervenes (mostly through advisory missions rather than deployments in combat).

Different Shia groups in the region are among Iran's natural audiences and allies. Even prior to the establishment of the Islamic Republic, whose revolutionary ideology is often seen as a determining factor in its cultivation of Shia allies, the Shah leveraged the country's religious ties to Shia groups in the region.[64] Today, the Islamic Republic continues to leverage these connections in its military campaigns. As Alawites, the Assad family rules as a minority over a majority of the roughly two-thirds of Syria that is composed of Sunnis. Alawites are adherents of a branch of Shiism and account for approximately 11 percent of the Syrian population.[65] Other minority groups, such as the Syrian Christian population, have also traditionally seen the Assad family as a bulwark against Sunni majoritarianism. As a secular autocrat, Assad is not driven by religion as the leaders of Iran are. Furthermore, Assad's policies are not shaped by religion, by and large. In fact, the two countries' ideologies have few areas of overlap. The Syrian regime's underlying ideology is Arab nationalism (i.e., privileging Arab ethnicity over other ties), which is the inverse of the Islamic Republic's ideology.

However, religious ties have factored into the Assad regime's relationship to Tehran. As members of a minority religious group that has ruled with an iron fist over a majority of the population for decades,

---

[63] Although Iran's proxies in some cases do not share cultural, ethnic, religious, or linguistic ties but rather have a shared adversary, as is the case with Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

[64] Abbas William Samii, "The Shah's Lebanon Policy: The Role of the SAVAK," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1, January 1997; and Arash Reisinezhad, *The Shah of Iran, the Iraqi Kurds, and the Lebanese Shia*, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p. 2.

[65] Stefan Winter, *A History of the 'Alawis: From Medieval Aleppo to the Turkish Republic*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016, p. 1.

the Assad family has an incentive to forge ties with groups and governments whose religious identity it shares. For Iran, whose position as one of a few Shia-majority countries in an overwhelmingly Sunni (and Arab) region makes it inherently vulnerable, the potential collapse of one of the only Shia-governed states in the Middle East and its possible replacement by a Sunni government—which could then forge stronger ties to Iran's Sunni rivals (particularly, Saudi Arabia)—could entail cataclysmic regional repercussions.

From the start of the intervention, Iran prioritized its support on protecting and training Shia co-identity populations. As Hossein Hamedani, an IRGC commander who was killed in an ISIS attack in Aleppo in 2015, explained, Qassem Soleimani and he flew to Damascus and began to organize 2,000 Alawite "youths."[66] The two commanders and their men supplied the Alawites and Shias with weapons and began to train the fighters.[67] They leveraged these religious ties to quickly form new units.[68] Although Iran intervened in the Syrian conflict in part because of the existence of the co-identity group populations in the host country and used these ties in the conduct of military operations, there are also indications that at least some in Tehran understood the limits of and risks associated with this approach. As with other factors leading to Iran's intervention in Syria, the sectarian dimension of the conflict presented the country with both challenges and opportunities, and unless Iran was able to navigate them adequately, it risked jeopardizing not just its ongoing campaign but also its place in the region.

According to some Iranian sources (which should not necessarily be taken at face value), Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei advised Damascus to minimize casualties on both sides, noting that the other side, like the Syrian forces, was also composed of young Muslims, albeit young Muslims who had been fooled into joining takfiris.[69]

66 "Aghaz-e bohran-e Surieh be revayat-e Shahid Hossein Hamedani," 2016.

67 "Aghaz-e bohran-e Surieh be revayat-e Shahid Hossein Hamedani," 2016.

68 "Aghaz-e bohran-e Surieh be revayat-e Shahid Hossein Hamedani," 2016.

69 "Aghaz-e bohran-e Surieh be revayat-e Shahid Hossein Hamedani," 2016.

If true, this account would signal an Iranian concern about the danger of the sectarian nature of the conflict. However, this did not stop Iran from intervening and remaining engaged in a bloody conflict pitting the Alawite dictator against a largely Sunni population. And unlike in Iraq, where Iran worked with Shias and Kurds while trying to recruit some Sunni fighters against ISIS (with limited success), Iran seems to have largely banked on the Alawites in Syria.

That Iran factors sectarian identity into the way it defines its interests in Syria is confirmed by two other developments. The first is Iranian proselytization among tribes in eastern Syria. Iranian religious groups were successful at converting some members of the Baggara tribe in Deir Ezzour to Shiism prior to Syria's civil war, an effort which allowed Iran to seed support in areas otherwise inhospitable to its influence.[70] A second indicator of Iran factoring sectarian identity into how it defines its interest in Syria is its negotiation of population transfers inside Syria that involve Iran's Shia coreligionists. Perhaps the most notable was the IRGC's reported involvement in arranging the evacuation of Shia villagers from Kefraya and Al-Foua in opposition-held Idlib in return for allowing Sunni families to evacuate two communities near the Lebanese border.[71]

It is worth noting that the co-identity ties with the host country's Kurdish population do not appear to have factored heavily in the Iranian decision to intervene in Syria. Historically, Iran has had close ties to the Kurds, whose ethnic and cultural ties to Iran are strong (although the government has also long struggled with Kurdish separatism and thus views the Kurds with a degree of skepticism). However, unlike in Iraq, where Iran has often sided with Kurds (prior to and after the revolution to undermine Baghdad and following the rise of ISIS to counter the group), Iran's ties to the Kurds in Syria have been much more limited. In that sense, the Kurds' co-identity with Iran has not been a strong factor in forging a Kurdish-Iranian alliance in the Syrian conflict, even as the Kurds and Iran have nominally shared the objec-

70 Nicholas A. Heras, Bassam Barabandi, and Nidal Betare, "Deir Azzour Tribal Mapping Project," Center for a New American Security, September 2017.

71 "Evacuation of Two Pro-Assad Syrian Villages Complete," Reuters, July 18, 2018.

tive of countering ISIS. In the counter-ISIS efforts in Iraq, by contrast, Iran was reportedly the first weapon supplier for the Kurds.[72] However, with the Kurds in Syria being largely focused on the counter-ISIS fight and Iran mostly having intervened to keep Assad in place, the two parties did not end up cooperating as they did in Iraq. Instead, the Kurds were allied with the United States, whose position that Assad had to step down was in conflict with that of Iran.

Co-identity group populations in Syria served as an important driver behind the Iranian involvement in Syria and the means by which the regime intervened there. However, they also presented a challenge to Tehran: Iran intervened in Syria in support of and alongside a regime representing the Alawite minority and cracking down on the Sunni majority. This further exacerbated the Islamic Republic's image as a sectarian actor in Syria and in the region more broadly.

Factor 4: External Threats: Incentivizing Iran to Seek Military Experience

A fourth factor motivating Iran to intervene in Syria lies in its perception of external threats to Iranian territorial sovereignty: specifically, Israel and other regional partners of the United States. In addition to statements by military leaders describing the threat created by Israel and others, this perceived external threat is evidenced by Iran's motivation to build stronger military capabilities. This motivation is most clearly demonstrated in Iran's eagerness to expose its troops to combat, enhance jointness and cohesion, and gain combat experience. For Iran, expanding its strategic depth and developing and testing capabilities in an actual conflict was a practical way to prevent and prepare for a potential conflict with the United States and for regional contingencies. Iran sees the United States as the greatest threat to its regime survival and national security. As a result, it has largely designed its military doctrine and strategy around the principles of deterrence and

---

72 Isabel Coles, "Iran Supplied Weapons to Iraqi Kurds; Baghdad Bomb Kills 12," Reuters, August 26, 2014a.

defense against Israel primarily and the United States secondarily. Although Tehran did not obtain new capabilities in the lead-up to the conflict, the intervention became an opportunity for improved capabilities, jointness, and battlefield effectiveness.

Given the significant perceived external threat, the opportunity for Iranian conventional, special, and irregular forces to gain their first joint-combined battlefield experience since 1988 was an incentive weighing (perhaps paradoxically) in favor of the decision to intervene. Initially, Tehran supported Damascus by largely adhering to its traditional playbook of indirect support. It sent advisers and provided weapons and equipment to the Assad regime. However, as the unrest grew into a conflict, Iran gradually increased its support for Assad, deploying forces to participate in the conflict by 2012.[73] Counterintuitively, it did so partly to expose its troops to combat, with the objective of increasing their battlefield effectiveness to better prepare them for regional and global threats. Iranian troops had not engaged in direct combat since the 1980s and, as a result, had not experienced full-scale warfare, engaging both branches of the Iranian armed forces.

Until Syria, most of Iran's military operations were limited to airstrikes and advisory missions aimed at supporting nonstate and state partners by supplying them with advice, training, weapons and equipment, and financing. Beyond its borders, the country had mostly leveraged the IRGC in these missions, confining the Artesh (Iran's conventional forces). The Syrian conflict provided Iran with the opportunity to deploy forces in combat and to do so by bringing both the IRGC and Artesh together to allow them to build cohesion. Similarly, Syria was also an opportunity for Tehran to conduct combined operations between its armed forces and its proxies.

Following the Iran-Iraq War, some Iranian military commanders and political officials acknowledged that their country's armed forces lacked cohesion during the war.[74] Iranian battlefield effectiveness had suffered as a result of purges within the Artesh, and the creation and

---

[73] Black, 2012.

[74] "Majara-ye gofteh nashodeh az bombaran-e mavaze'-e DAESH tavasot-e jangadeha-ye Artesh," 2017.

empowerment of the IRGC came at the expense of Iran's conventional units. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Iran attempted to remedy these shortcomings by developing a better division of labor between the two branches, though the IRGC maintained the upper hand in virtually all matters pertaining to defense and security and continued to enjoy more resources than the conventional military.[75] By deploying IRGC and Artesh troops side by side, the country sought to develop jointness and cohesion, thus overcoming some of the shortcomings it had experienced during the Iran-Iraq War and building and demonstrating capabilities that would allow it to respond more effectively in future contingencies.

According to Pourdastan, the Artesh ground forces insisted on having "a presence in Syria," although he argued that the Artesh only sent volunteers and played an advisory role there.[76] The Artesh and the IRGC jointly trained the Syrian forces, though the Artesh operated under the supervision and command of the Quds Force, which led Iranian training missions in Syria.[77] The appropriate authorization was issued in consultation with Soleimani and the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the Artesh deployed the 65th Airborne Special Forces Brigade to Syria.[78] Similarly, the Artesh air force (which is superior to the IRGC air force) was present in Syria. Pourdastan noted that the Artesh air force was largely operating for transportation rather than in a combat capacity in Syria and did not have fighters in theater.[79] Syria is one of the only opportunities

---

75 "Artesh va Sepah behtarin sath-e ta'aamol ra darand," *Jam-e Jam*, April 18, 2018.

76 "Amir Pourdasatan tashrih kar joz'eyat-e hozoor-e Artesh-e Iran dar Araq va Surieh," 2018; Majara-ye gofteh nashodeh az bombaran-e mavaze'-e DAESH tavasot-e jangadeha-ye Artesh," 2017.

77 "Amir Pourdasatan tashrih kar joz'eyat-e hozoor-e Artesh-e Iran dar Araq va Surieh," 2018.

78 "Ezam-e mostashari-e takavaran-e type 65 nohad be Surieh / takavaran-e niroo-ye zamini dar Surieh mostaqar shodand," *Tasnim News*, April 16, 2016; "Amir Pourdasatan tashrih kar joz'eyat-e hozoor-e Artesh-e Iran dar Araq va Surieh," 2018.

79 "Amir Pourdasatan tashrih kar joz'eyat-e hozoor-e Artesh-e Iran dar Araq va Surieh," 2018.

Iran has had since the end of the Iran-Iraq War to operate in combat in several domains.

This unparalleled volume of Iranian activity on foreign soil and emphasis on scope of jointness also extended to other IRGC units and the Basij volunteer force. The IRGC deployed several units to Syria. The Quds Force was responsible for the command and oversight of most Iranian and Iranian-backed forces in Syria. However, the IRGC's Saberin Unit, a special battalion, was also deployed to theater.[80] The Basij also sent all-volunteer forces to fight in Syria. For the Basij, Syria provided the opportunity to deploy a newer addition to the organization, the special unit known as Fatehin, established shortly before the start of the Syrian war in 2009–2010 (and likely in response to the 2009 Green Movement).[81]

In addition to seeking to increase cohesion within the Iranian armed forces and to build jointness among them, Tehran saw Syria as an opportunity to expose its military to the conduct of military operations with other players, particularly Russia and its proxies. Since the revolution, Iranian armed forces have had limited exposure to and cooperation with other militaries. With the exception of a few joint drills with neighboring states, Russia, and China, they largely operate on their own or with nonstate partners. Iran welcomed the opportunity to coordinate with Russia and operate alongside its forces. Moreover, Iranian forces were embedded with proxies, particularly the Fatemiyoun and Zeinabiyoun, in battle. Soleimani was in charge of the Iranian forces' command and Iran's closest proxies, whose forces Soleimani visited on the ground.[82] That Soleimani would be tasked with the command of proxies was not surprising because the IRGC-QF in general and Soleimani in particular command Iran's nonstate partners. How-

80 "Kolah sabzha-ye Artesh tebq-e kodam qanun be Surieh raftand?" 2016.

81 "Emruz keshvarha darbareh-ye Surieh nachar be mozakereh ba Iran hastand / dar hal-e gostaresh-e 'Gordan-e Fatehin' dar kol-e keshvar hastim," *Tasnim News*, October 21, 2016; "Khun-e shohada-ye modafe'-e haram-e yegan-e Tafehin masir-e harakat-e ayandeh ra tarsim mikonad," *Tasnim News*, February 1, 2016.

82 "Hozur-e sardar Soleimani dar kenar-e razmandehgan-e Fatemiyoun dar khatt-e moqadam-e jebheh-ye Surieh + film," Bashgah-e khabarnegaran-e javan, March 28, 2018.

ever, the Artesh also played a role in the command of certain nonstate clients, including the Fatemiyoun. As Pourdastan observed, the Artesh special forces were involved in commanding the Fatemiyoun.[83]

Because of conflicting public statements and the general lack of accurate open-source data and comprehensive literature on the Iranian intervention in Syria, it is difficult to identify and verify some details supporting this factor. For example, although it is clear that Iran deployed IRGC, Basij, and Artesh forces to Syria, Iranian political and military officials have not offered a coherent explanation of the level of their presence and interoperability. Similarly, Iranian military commanders have confirmed some level of presence by the Artesh special forces in Syria while denying that they deployed entire units, claiming instead that only some individuals were sent to theater.[84]

Factor 5: National Status Concerns

As discussed previously, Iran (like Russia and China) sees itself as the heir to a great civilization and a rightful regional power.[85] Iranians believe that their history is marked by glorious accomplishments and contributions to humanity, along with several humiliating experiences. For Iran, these humiliations include foreign interventions, which have led to the dismemberment of its territory and blows to its sovereignty. Generations of Iranian leaders have promised to return the nation to its rightful place, including the revolutionaries who overthrew the Shah in 1979. Some evidence indicates that these ideas have shaped Iranian decisions to intervene militarily and have shaped how Iran conducts its wars. Hence, prestige and power projection factor into Iranian decisionmaking on military interventions.

---

83 "Amir Pourdasatan tashrih kar joz'eyat-e hozoor-e Artesh-e Iran dar Araq va Surieh," 2018.

84 "Kolah sabzha-ye Artesh tebq-e kodam qanun be Surieh raftand?" 2016.

85 April Longley Alley, Ali Vaez, Heiko Wimmen, and Ofer Zalzberg, *Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East*, Washington, D.C.: International Crisis Group, April 13, 2018.

Nevertheless, national status concerns did not play a critical role in shaping Iran's decision to intervene in Syria in 2011. Iran initially became involved in Syria covertly and denied that it was supporting Assad. This is because Tehran was hoping to quickly prop the dictator in pursuit of the factors outlined earlier. Nevertheless, as the war continued, Iranian involvement increased and gradually became more obvious. Syria was more of a liability for Iran than it was an element of prestige: Assad's atrocities further increased the reputational costs of the conflict for Iran. And Iran's status suffered from its alliance with Assad (particularly following the repeated use of chemical weapons by the regime against civilians). Later, Tehran's status improved when Moscow joined the Assad coalition in 2015.

Moscow siding with Tehran and playing a critical role in preserving the regime in Damascus (which the majority of the international community deemed unsalvageable and undesirable) may have served to restore and possibly enhance perceived Iranian power and status, although Iran continues to be seen in the region and beyond as a nefarious actor whose support facilitated continued mass atrocities by the Assad regime. Iran's intervention forced the West to negotiate with it on the future of Syria. In early diplomatic processes (Geneva I, for instance), Iran was excluded. Later, Iran was invited (e.g., in the International Syria Support Group and the Vienna process). This was in grudging recognition by the West, including the Obama administration, that Iran was critical to the future of Syria. Second, Iran, Russia, and Turkey led the Astana process, also a product of the influence Iran achieved through its military intervention. Nevertheless, any gains in prestige were a byproduct of the war and not a result Iran knew it could expect from its involvement in Syria.

Factor 6: Domestic Politics and Legitimacy

As noted previously, Iran sought to keep its involvement in Syria covert during the initial phase of the conflict. This was in part to avoid a possible backlash at home, driven by the public's outrage at the country taking sides in a domestic matter and doing so on the side of a brutal

dictator. However, when it became public that Iran was supporting Assad, the Iranian leadership tried to present a compelling narrative legitimizing Iran's actions in Syria to its constituency and abroad. This narrative presented Assad as a stabilizing force in a chaotic region and his opponents as terrorists, whose operations had to be confined to that conflict lest they spill into Iran. As Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei put it,

> these individuals who leave here to go to Iraq or Syria in the name of defending the sites of the Prophet's family in the face of the takfiris, are in reality defending their own cities. Of course, their intent is [to serve] God. But the reality of the situation is this: it is the defense of Iran.[86]

The rise of ISIS in 2014 presented Iran's leaders with an opportunity to legitimize an unpopular intervention.

Nevertheless, domestic politics and legitimacy have largely presented obstacles to be managed rather than factors that shape Iranian considerations on the Syrian conflict. The rise of ISIS helped manage this challenge more effectively. Fears of an ISIS spillover into Iran and the public's concerns were part of the Iranian calculations on Syria since 2014; however, they were also a convenient excuse and an opportunity for Tehran's continued assistance to Assad.

Summary

The Syrian civil war is perhaps the most significant conflict in contemporary Iranian history since the end of the Iran-Iraq War. Unlike the ISIS insurgency in Iraq, the Syrian conflict did not have direct implications for Iranian security (such as a potential spillover of the conflict into the country). Yet Tehran committed more resources to Syria than it had to any other conflict since the end of the Iran-Iraq War. In particular, the fact that Iran committed ground forces (from the IRGC and Artesh alike) rather than relying on an advisory mission as it typi-

[86] Khamenei, 2016.

cally does makes Syria an unusual case. It is not yet clear whether Syria will provide a new model of Iranian intervention or whether the country will return to mostly conducting advisory missions in the future. However, it appears that Tehran has largely benefited from the war in strategic terms.

In addition to meeting its primary objective of keeping its ally Assad in power, Tehran has acquired significant combat experience from the war, including IRGC-Artesh and Iranian and proxy joint operations. Moreover, Iran was able to preserve (and perhaps even enhance) its land bridge to Lebanon to facilitate logistical support to Lebanese Hezbollah, which it sees as its primary deterrent against Israel. Iran also was able to project power and increase its strategic depth thanks to the war.

Table 4.2 summarizes our analysis of the factors that are relevant to the Syria case study.

Table 4.2
Summary of Analysis of Factors for Iranian Intervention in Syria (2011–Present)

Factor Name	Evidence for Factor	Evidence Against Factor	Summary Assessment
Regional power balance and stability	• Fragile regional states seen as opportunity for Iranian growth; risk tolerance for degrees of neighborhood volatility but not failed states • Friendly Syrian government key to Iranian regional influence • Geostrategic importance of maintaining access to land bridge to Lebanon and territory bordering Israel • Opportunity to increase Iran's strategic depth and project more military power beyond its borders	• None	• Clearly the strongest factor in the initial decision to intervene, at least until the rise of ISIS
Alliance or partnership with host	• Only consistent Iranian partner in region since 1979 (including during Iran-Iraq War) • Loss of ally would deepen Iranian isolation and weaken regional influence	• As Assad's fortunes turned, Iran revealed that its allegiance lay not with his family's regime personally but with preserving power in Damascus generally	• Factor dynamics unlike formal alliances or mutual defense treaties; more transactional and opportunistic
Co-identity group populations in host	• Alawites, as a branch of Shiism, constitute 11 percent of the population • Iran's long history of leveraging Shia ties in military campaigns	• Tehran's awareness of unintended consequences associated with exploiting minority Shia sectarian dimension • Weaker ethnic and cultural ties to Syrian Kurds than Iraqi Kurds	• Co-identity populations affected both the decision to intervene and how the intervention was conducted

Table 4.2—Continued

Factor Name	Evidence for Factor	Evidence Against Factor	Summary Assessment
External threats to sovereignty: Incentivizing Iran to seek military experience	• First opportunity to gain combat experience since Iran-Iraq War and improved cooperation between IRGC and Artesh • New opportunity to improve combined operations between Iranian forces and state actors, chiefly Russia, and proxy non-state groups	• Absence of unbiased open-source data renders factor difficult to verify	• As a result of Iran's concerns regarding other external threats, gaining conventional and joint-combined battlefield experience was an incentive in and of itself
National status concerns	• National identity perceptions of Iran as the heir to a great civilization and a rightful regional power; also as a victim of historical humiliations by other great powers • Improving prestige and status in international community are important policy drivers	• No major revanchist territorial ambitions (unlike Russia, China, North Korea) • Iran initially denied its involvement, which it likely viewed as risking more reputational costs than advancing prestige benefits	• Iran's revisionist political and cultural impulses are possibly less acute than those in other key adversarial states. This factor seemingly is secondary to more-pragmatic foreign policy considerations regarding the decision to intervene
Domestic politics and legitimacy	• Tehran initially sought to obfuscate its involvement, suggesting some sensitivity to domestic opinion • Proliferation of social media and democratization of news media likely increase regime sensitivity to public opinion • Later, Tehran pivoted to propagating an image of Iran as a stabilizing force in the region	• State control over Iranian media outlets mitigates the strength of this factor	• Overall, domestic politics and legitimacy are obstacles to be managed, not factors strongly shaping this specific intervention decision

CHAPTER FIVE

Case Study: Iranian Intervention to Counter the Rising ISIS Threat in Iraq (2014–Present)

In this case study, we assess a somewhat different set of the hypotheses identified in Chapters Two and Three by evaluating six factors that appear to best explain the Iranian decision to intervene in Iraq in response to the rise of ISIS in 2014. We selected this case study for three reasons. First, this case is typical of Iran's modus operandi: a small-footprint, low-visibility, and mostly advisory force, leveraging proxies. This case allows us to assess the factors that may be most likely to drive interventions of this type. Second, this case is potentially generalizable to other Iranian interventions because it represents a typical Iranian intervention. As a result, understanding this case is significant beyond ongoing U.S. Army operations in Iraq, a theater that will continue to remain of importance to the United States and a candidate for possible U.S.-Iran confrontation. Finally, the case is critical to U.S. Army planners' ability to forecast and possibly respond to other future Iranian interventions. In particular, the contrast and comparison of the Syrian and Iraqi cases provide interesting insights into the range of Iran's military interventions.[1]

---

[1] It is also worth noting that we had few candidates from which to choose, given the number of cases of Iranian military interventions available to us. The research team considered the Iranian intervention in Lebanon in 1982 because it would also be in line with Iran's modus operandi but decided against that case for several reasons. First, the limited reporting and literature available on the case made it difficult to present an informed and well-sourced analysis and to identify and examine several factors in a comprehensive manner. Second, although the intervention is typical of Iran's modus operandi, it took place less than three years after the establishment of the Islamic Republic and during the IRGC's nascent days.

The six potential factors examined in this case study as possible drivers of Iranian intervention behavior are (1) external threat, (2) regional power balance and stability, (3) alliance or partnership with host, (4) co-identity group populations in host, (5) domestic politics and legitimacy, and (6) national status concerns. We conclude with a summary of this analysis, highlighting which factors appear to be best supported and least supported by evidence from the case.

Background

From Iran's perspective, Iraq is one of the most significant countries to its national security. The two neighbors share a 910-mile porous border and have significant ethnic and religious ties: specifically, substantial Kurdish populations and a Shia majority in a region dominated by majority Sunni states. As a result, since the 1979 Islamic Revolution (at which point Tehran became a U.S. adversary), Iran has been engaged in Iraq in some capacity for more than three decades. Iran's first major postrevolution military intervention was the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq War: an eight-year, bloody conflict initiated by Saddam Hussein's Iraq, who sought to exploit the chaos created by the revolution and the U.S. hostage crisis (which isolated Iran internationally and signaled the formal end of the U.S.-Iran partnership) to annex parts of Southwestern Iran while checking revolutionary Iran, whose leadership had called for a Shia revival and had stated its objective of exporting its ideology.[2]

During and following the war, Tehran cultivated ties with Iraqi Shias and Kurds to undermine Baghdad and ensure that it would never again turn into an existential threat to Iran's national security.[3] During the war, exiled Iraqi Shias also created the Supreme Council for the

---

Therefore, we chose a more recent case for the purposes of informing U.S. decisionmakers and Army planners because it would be more representative of the current Iranian decision-making process, drivers behind the country's decision to intervene, and how the country does so.

2 For a detailed discussion of the origins of the war, see Murray and Woods, 2014.

3 Michael Eisenstadt, "Iran and Iraq," in Robin Wright, ed., *The Iran Primer: Power, Politics, and U.S. Policy*, Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2010.

Islamic Revolution in Iraq—later known as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq—in Iran and began to organize there; following the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, many of these elements returned to Iraq to operate in militias or join the new government.[4] Throughout the 1990s, Iran continued to target Kurdish and MeK[5] positions in Iraq using missiles and rockets.[6]

Starting in 2003, when the United States invaded Iraq and toppled the Hussein government, Iran again became active on the ground, deploying its personnel in train, advise, and assist missions, and it leveraged its proxies (mostly composed of Shia groups, collectively known as Special Groups or, more recently, as the Popular Mobilization Forces) to target U.S. troops.[7] By the time the U.S. withdrawal was complete in 2011, Iran had arguably become the "most influential foreign power in Iraq."[8] Starting in 2014 with the rise of ISIS, Iran shifted its mission to countering the group, tacitly working on the same side as its chief adversary, the United States. It also overtly empowered local partners, including the Kurdish Peshmerga and the key Shia militias, some of which it had previously helped establish to fight the U.S. occupation, notably including As'aib Ahl Al Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah.[9]

---

4 Eisenstadt, 2010.

5 The MeK, also known as the People's Mujahedeen of Iran, is an Iranian resistance group that was exiled after the revolution. During the Iran-Iraq War, the MeK fought alongside Saddam's troops. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, MeK terrorists continued to conduct attacks against Iranian targets.

6 Amin Tarzi and Darby Parliament, "Missile Messages: Iran Strikes MKO Bases in Iraq," *Nonproliferation Review*, Summer 2001, p. 125; Associated Press, "Iranian Jets Bomb Kurdish Base in Iraq, Killing 1 and Hurting 3," *New York Times*, November 10, 1994; and Paul Iddon, "Iran Bombarded Iraq Throughout the 1990s," War Is Boring, July 23, 2018.

7 U.S. Army, 2019a, p. 22; U.S. Army, 2019b, pp. 473–477.

8 Kenneth M. Pollack, "Iran in Iraq," Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council, December 2017, p. 1.

9 Carla Humud, Christopher Blanchard, Jeremy Sharp, and Jim Zanotti, "Iranian Assistance to Groups in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and the Palestinian Territories," memorandum to Senator Mark Kirk, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, July 31, 2015. On the history of Iranian support to Iraqi paramilitary proxies and their evolution, see Michael Knights, "The Evolution of Iran's Special Groups in Iraq," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 3, No. 11–12, November 2010; and Phillip Smyth, "All the Ayatollah's Men," *Foreign Policy*, September 18, 2014.

Evolution of the ISIS Threat in Iraq

Various iterations of the group now known as ISIS had existed in Iraq for over a decade prior to the organization's catalyzing offensives in early to mid-2014. Led by Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi,[10] ISIS's original predecessor organization—Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (TwJ, or The Monotheism and the Holy War Group)—was rebranded as an al-Qaeda affiliate in October 2004: al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI, or al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers).[11] Beginning in the mid-2000s, the organization evolved into one of the most lethal nonstate groups in Iraq, frequently targeting Iraqi Shias. Zarqawi's aggressive stance toward and alienation of other jihadists, combined with his brutality and fixation on Shias, were persistent sources of tension between AQI and al-Qaeda's core.[12]

The organization reached its operational height in 2006–2007,[13] but it could not withstand the U.S. troop surge, begun in January 2007. The Islamic State in Iraq's (ISI's) peak strength and reach fell into sharp decline alongside the prospects of the group's first efforts to govern and defend territory.[14] From this nadir, the organization

---

[10] Zarqawi first established a relationship with core al-Qaeda leadership in 1998, when Osama bin Laden provided him with financing to set up a training camp in Herat Province, Afghanistan. Zarqawi and his trainees fought alongside core al-Qaeda and other foreign jihadists during the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001; Zarqawi subsequently traveled to northern Iraq via Iran, where he pledged *bayat* [fealty] to bin Laden after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Zack Gold, "Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI): An Al-Qaeda Affiliate Case Study," Arlington, Va.: CNA, October 2017, p. 4; and M. J. Kirdar, "Al Qaeda in Iraq," Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2011, pp. 1–3).

[11] Mapping Militant Organizations, "The Islamic State," Stanford University, updated June 2018; Gold, 2017, pp. 4–5, 9.

[12] Lawrence Wright, "ISIS's Savage Strategy in Iraq," *New Yorker*, June 16, 2014; Gold, 2017, pp. 4–5.

[13] According to various sources, active membership in AQI/ISI prior to the U.S. troop surge peaked at an estimated 5,000 to 15,000 troops. Similarly, AQI-attributed terrorist incidents spiked from 3,256 in 2005 to 6,631 in 2006 and 6,210 in 2007 (Gold, 2017, p. 3; Kirdar, 2011, p. 5).

[14] Robin Wright, J. M. Berger, William Braniff, et al., *The Jihadi Threat: ISIS, al-Qaeda, and Beyond*, Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace and the Wilson Center, December 2016/January 2017, p. 10; Gold, 2017, p. 6.

Following the surge and Sunni Awakening, AQI/ISI-attributed terrorist incidents fell from 6,210 in 2007 to 3,256 in 2008. Similarly, by 2008, an estimated 2,400 group mem-

regrouped and resurged. The Shura Council appointed Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the new emir of ISI, who moved quickly to rebuild the group by capitalizing on three concurrent dynamics: the 2010–2011 withdrawal of U.S. forces (which allowed ISI territorial sanctuary, especially in al-Anbar, and a security vacuum in which to collect local revenues), the outbreak of civil war in neighboring Syria (which provided an inflow of foreign fighters and materiel, as well as increased cross-border freedom of operation), and growing domestic frustration with the increasingly sectarian policies of the al-Malaki government (which increased Sunni popular support for ISI at least marginally).[15]

In mid-2011, al-Baghdadi deployed ISI forces to Syria to establish a new al-Qaeda affiliate, al-Nusra Front. A watershed moment in the evolution of ISIS transpired in March 2013, when Syrian rebels, including al-Nusra, captured the strategically important city of al-Raqqa. ISI subsequently expanded its territorial footprint throughout eastern Syria and western Iraq, and al-Baghdadi unilaterally attempted to reabsorb the al-Nusra Front into ISI, sparking a crisis between affiliate and core leadership. Al-Nusra's leadership broke with al-Baghdadi and swore *bayat* directly to the emir of core al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Finally, in April 2013, ISI rebranded itself the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (also known as ISIS).[16]

Over the course of 2013 and 2014, ISIS offensives resulted in the group's control of large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria.[17] The

---

bers had been killed and 8,800 had been detained since the start of the surge (Kirdar, 2011, p. 5).

15 William McCants, "Who Is Islamic State Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi?" *BBC News*, March 8, 2016.

16 Gold, 2017, pp. 15–16.

17 Mapping Militant Organizations, 2018. According to RAND estimates, the Islamic State at its peak in late 2014 controlled roughly 100,000 km^2 of territory containing some 11 million people, mostly in Iraq and Syria. For perspective, the combined areas and populations of the two countries in 2014 were about 625,000 km^2 and 54 million people. At its peak, ISIS may have controlled on the order of 16 percent and 20 percent of Syria and Iraq's combined territory and populations, respectively. ISIS began to lose territory in 2015 (Seth G. Jones, James Dobbins, Daniel Byman, Christopher S. Chivvis, Ben Connable, Jeffrey Martini, Eric Robinson, and Nathan Chandler, *Rolling Back the Islamic State*, Santa

organization captured international attention because of its highly visible military successes (including public images of Iraqi security forces dropping weapons and fleeing advancing blitzkriegs) and rapid geographical expansion, ability to hold onto seized territories, brutality displayed by its members (including public beheadings), and sophistication in disseminating propaganda, recruiting foreign fighters, and exploiting multiple local and foreign revenue sources.[18] In summer 2014, ISIS declared its territory a caliphate; just days later, al-Baghdadi made a rare public appearance, proclaiming himself Caliph.[19]

Tehran's Response to the Rise of ISIS in Iraq

For Tehran, the prospect of an adversarial force like ISIS—whose leadership had placed Iran among its top targets—gathering within the borders of its historical enemy constituted an imminent national security threat.[20] Iran, which had deployed ground forces to Iraq on and off for more than a decade, responded by expanding its mission. Previously, from 2003 to 2013, Iran's key political objectives in Iraq—countering U.S. influence and forces and propping up Shia political proxies and militias—required only a small Iranian footprint. Now, however, Iran saw ISIS not only as a threat to the influence it had achieved in Iraq since Saddam's ouster but also as a threat to its regime security and internal stability.[21]

To counter this threat, beginning in at least mid-June 2014, Tehran reportedly increased its military footprint in Iraq, deploying upward of 2,000 new forces (though it continued to publicly deny its

---

Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1912, 2017, pp. xi–xii). For a detailed account of the rise and decline of the Islamic State, see Jones et al., 2017, pp. 13–38.

18 Roula Khalaf and Sam Jones, "Selling Terror: How Isis Details Its Brutality," *Financial Times*, June 17, 2014.

19 Alissa J. Rubin, "Militant Leader in Rare Appearance in Iraq," *New York Times*, July 5, 2014.

20 Golnaz Esfandiari, "IS Propaganda Increasingly Targeting Iran and Its Sunnis," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, June 6, 2017; and "Iraq Says it Shared Information That France, U.S., Iran Were Targets," Reuters, November 15, 2015.

21 Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 2015.

formal troop presence).[22] These troops recruited and trained forces (composed primarily of Shias and Kurds, but also, to a lesser degree, Sunnis), supplied Shia and Kurdish groups with weapons and equipment, and advised them as they confronted ISIS. The Iranian mission in Iraq also tacitly placed Tehran and Washington on the same side, even leading to some coordination between the two adversaries from time to time. Nevertheless, the United States did not invite Iran to join the international coalition combating ISIS, composed of dozens of regional partners and European allies; likewise, Tehran made it clear that it did not have any intention of joining forces with Washington in an official capacity or as part of a U.S.-led coalition, choosing instead to coordinate efforts implicitly. As the ISIS threat began to fade in 2018, Iran and the United States began to compete in Iraq once again, and Tehran renewed its attention and refocused its resources on undermining the U.S. presence there, especially as tensions increased between the two adversaries following the U.S. withdrawal in May 2018 from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the then three-year-old international agreement on Iran's nuclear program.

Iran's presence in Iraq was predominantly secured through the IRGC: the paramilitary branch of the Iranian armed forces focused on regional activities. In fact, the Iraq portfolio in Iran was mostly managed by Soleimani, whose personal relationships with key figures in the Shia and Kurdish communities in Iraq made him a natural facilitator

[22] Martin Chulov, "Iran Sends Troops into Iraq to Aid Fight Against ISIS Militants," *The Guardian*, June 14, 2014. Because of these official denials, obtaining reliable data on Iranian forces in Iraq is notoriously difficult. According to another source, for instance, this initial deployment in mid-June 2014 consisted of two battalions of IRGC units, which were tasked with defending Baghdad and the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala. Still another source, citing a senior Iranian cleric, claimed that between June and December 2014, Iran sent "more than 1,000 military advisers to Iraq, as well as elite units." See Farnaz Fassihi, "Iran Deploys Forces to Fight al Qaeda-Inspired Militants in Iraq," *Wall Street Journal*, June 12, 2014; Missy Ryan and Loveday Morris, "The U.S. and Iran Are Aligned in Iraq Against the Islamic State – For Now," *Washington Post*, December 27, 2014; and Nima Adelkhah, "Iranian Intervention in Iraq Against the Islamic State: Strategy, Tactics, and Impact," *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 13, No. 2, January 23, 2015.

there.[23] Much of the Quds Force mission in Iraq was to lend support to local groups to combat ISIS.

However, Iran's involvement in Iraq (while sizable) was significantly smaller than the forces Iran deployed into Syria, even though the ISIS threat in Iraq potentially represented an existential threat to the stability of the Iranian regime. This was in part because Iran could rely on the international coalition, which was already active against ISIS in Iraq and whose operational objectives it largely shared. In that sense, Iran was able to conserve its ground forces to support Assad in Syria while protecting its political influence in Iraq with a minimal presence. In a similar sense, Iran's intervention in Iraq since 2014 appears more in line with the country's usual pattern of interventions—mostly relying on advisory missions—while the Syrian case is seemingly a departure from Tehran's modus operandi.

In addition to training, arming, and advising forces in Iraq, Iran has conducted several airstrikes in that country since the rise of ISIS.[24] Relying mostly on its missile and drone capabilities to make up for its lack of an adequate conventional air force, Iran used intermittent missile strikes and unmanned aerial systems to deter ISIS in Iraq, as it would later in Syria. Previously, Tehran had used virtually no airpower in Iraq since 2001, when it terminated a decade-long campaign of intermittent airstrikes against Kurdish and MeK targets, primarily in northern Iraq.[25] During the anti-ISIS campaign, Iran launched missiles and rockets into Iraqi territory to hit insurgent targets, and it repositioned assets, including missiles, to Iraqi soil. These airstrikes took place in the aftermath of ISIS's first attacks in Iran and against the backdrop of mounting tensions with the United States, prompting the country to respond to deter ISIS and the United States from targeting

---

[23] Soufan, 2018.

[24] "Bombaran-e Da'esh dar Araq va Surieh ba pahpadha-ye Sepah," *Tabnak*, November 21, 2018; John Irish and Ahmed Rasheed, "Exclusive: Iran Moves Missiles to Iraq in Warning to Enemies," Reuters, August 31, 2018.

[25] The last Iranian airstrike prior to the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq occurred in 2001, according to our analysis of available data; however, it is possible that unreported airstrikes continued until 2003.

Iran's territory and population again and to send a signal of strength to domestic audiences.[26]

Factors to Be Assessed

In the sections that follow, we test previously identified hypotheses regarding where, when, and why Iran intervenes by analyzing the factors that appear to have most directly affected Tehran's decision to become involved in Iraq to counter ISIS starting in 2014. Table 5.1 summarizes this preliminary assessment. We identified six factors as particularly important in this case, which we discuss in greater length

Table 5.1
Summary of Potential Factors Affecting Likelihood of Iranian Intervention in Iraq (2014–Present)

Category	Factor Name	Case-Specific Relevance
Geopolitics	National status concerns	Medium
	Regional power balance and stability	High
	External threat to sovereignty	High
	Alliance or partnership with host	High
Domestic	Domestic politics and legitimacy	Medium
	Economic interests	Low
	Co-identity group populations in host	High
Ideational	Adversary leadership and personality	Low
	Ideology	Low
Enablers	Adversary military capabilities	Low

[26] ISIS achieved its first successful attacks on Iranian soil on June 7, 2017, when six terrorists conducted twin, high-profile attacks in Tehran against the Iranian parliament and the mausoleum of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, founder of the Islamic Republic. See Ariane M. Tabatabai, "ISIS Hits Iran: Terror Comes to the Islamic Republic," *Foreign Affairs*, July 4, 2017; and Suzanne Maloney, "ISIS Attacks Iran and Accusations Fly," *Markaz*, Brookings Institution blog, June 9, 2017.

in the following sections: (1) external threat, (2) regional power balance and stability, (3) alliance or partnership with host, (4) co-identity group populations in host, (5) national status concerns, and (6) domestic politics and legitimacy. We note that national status concerns and domestic politics were assessed to be of "moderate" importance, somewhat less than the first four listed here but more important than the other four factors. As we survey these factors, it is important to bear in mind that some of these factors are closely linked, thus leading to overlapping discussions in several areas.

Finally, we note that four potential factors (economic interests, ideology, adversary leadership and personality, and adversary military capabilities) were assessed to be of lower importance; these factors are not addressed in great detail in our presentation of this case study. Here, we briefly outline why in each case.

Iran and Iraq have considerable economic ties. However, we did not find economic interests to be one of the defining factors in shaping the Iranian decision to intervene in Iraq. Instead, we view economic interdependence as an important byproduct of Iranian involvement in Iraq and a significant factor in the two neighbors' relations. Tehran's decision to intervene in Iraq to combat ISIS was largely shaped by security and geopolitical, not economic, factors.

Ideational factors were less significant in shaping Iran's Iraq intervention. Although Iran remains a revolutionary actor, driven in part by ideology, its decisions to intervene militarily have largely been determined by pragmatic geopolitical considerations. Ideology, by contrast, has generally served as a means of rallying domestic constituents (chiefly recruiting volunteers in Iran to fight in conflicts) and galvanizing partners (particularly nonstate partners) after the decision to intervene has already been made. Similarly, although key figures within Iran have certainly shaped the decision to intervene in conflicts, the Iraqi case, in particular, demonstrates a systemwide consensus shaping the decision to intervene.

Iran's military capabilities, while of course relevant to the intervention, neither hindered nor encouraged the intervention.

Factor 1: External Threat to Sovereignty

The strongest factor influencing Tehran's decision to intervene in Iraq in 2014 was arguably its most basic: mitigating a potentially existential threat to its national territorial sovereignty posed by groups operating within its neighbor. As Iranian leaders and commanders would often claim throughout the conflict, "Today, Iran is fighting ISIS in Iraq so that it does not have to fight them in Tehran tomorrow."[27] Indeed, Iran's interventions in Iraq since 1979 have largely been driven by the country's national security concerns. As elsewhere, Tehran has frequently used instability in Iraq to grow its presence and influence there. However, unlike in Syria, for example, Iraq's security directly affects Iran's security. As a result, even as Iran was already involved in Iraq, the rise of ISIS prompted a new Iranian intervention there, shaped primarily by external national security concerns. The group's rise fueled Iranian fears about the disintegration of the Iraqi state and its implications for Iran's territorial integrity and national unity, as well as a potential ISIS spillover into Iranian territory.

ISIS's ability to quickly capture and hold onto swaths of territory, its access to resources, and its control of populations in Iraq, coupled with the group's violent extremist ideology and use of notoriously brutal tactics, raised security concerns across the globe in 2014.[28] For Iran, this external threat perception was especially grave, powered by the fact that Iran and Iraq share a porous border and have significant ethnic and religious ties, potentially paving the way for an ISIS spillover into Iran. Historical experience also factored into Iranians' view of the developments in neighboring Iraq. In the 1980s, an adversarial Baghdad, then led by Saddam Hussein, had attacked Iran. Like ISIS, the dictator viewed Shias with a great deal of skepticism and distrust

---

[27] "Taslihat-e Iran ke Daesh bayad az anha betarsad," *Diplomacy-e Irani*, April 9, 2015.

[28] Jeremy Ashkenas, Archie Tse, Derek Watkins, and Karen Yourish, "A Rogue State Along Two Rivers," *New York Times*, July 3, 2014; Ben Hubbard and Eric Schmitt, "Military Skill and Terrorist Technique Fuel Success of ISIS," *New York Times*, August 27, 2014; Ceylan Yeginsu, "ISIS Draws a Steady Stream of Recruits from Turkey," *New York Times*, September 15, 2014; Kirk Semple, "Yazidi Girls Seized by ISIS Speak Out After Escape," *New York Times*, November 14, 2014.

and believed Iranians (along with the United States and the "international Jewish conspiracy") to be his chief adversaries.[29]

The Iran-Iraq War—which was among the longest conventional interstate wars of the 20th century and resulted in an estimated 400,000–500,000 combined fatalities—shaped Iranian decisionmakers and military planners' worldviews, because it was the first war they fought shortly after toppling the monarchy and taking power.[30] Throughout the 1990s, Tehran conducted airstrikes in Iraqi territory to hit some Kurdish and MeK positions: The Kurds were viewed by Iran as a separatist group threatening Iranian territorial integrity and national unity, and the MeK was seen as a threat to the regime. The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq rid Iran of one of its chief regional adversaries and allowed it an opportunity to ensure that it would no longer be threatened by Iraq and build its influence there while undermining the United States.[31]

The rise of ISIS once again placed an adversarial force at Iran's border. Whereas Iran in the 1980s and 1990s sought to undermine the central authority in Iraq, it now faced the implications of the power vacuum and instability in its neighborhood and the resulting rise of a terrorist group that presented a threat to Iran. As a result, its intervention in Iraq was designed to achieve two seemingly paradoxical objectives to secure Iranian borders. First, Iran sought to support and empower the central authority and Iraqi forces, allowing them to exercise control over their territory once again.[32] Iran wished to ensure continued Iraqi territorial integrity and national unity, thus preventing a dismemberment of its neighbor, which could then threaten Iran's territorial integrity and national unity.[33] The Kurdish referendum in

---

29 Murray and Woods, 2014, pp. 33–34; Jerrold M. Post, "Saddam Hussein of Iraq: A Political Psychology Profile," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 12, No. 2, June 1991, p. 279.

30 Pollack, 2017, p. 1.

31 U.S. Army, 2019a, p. 22; U.S. Army, 2019b, pp. 473–477.

32 Tim Arango and Thomas Erdbrink, "U.S. and Iran Both Attack ISIS, but Try Not to Look Like Allies," *New York Times*, December 3, 2014.

33 "Iran Not Seeking Permission for Supporting Iraq," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, September 25, 2014.

2018 presented a particular challenge in this regard, because its success could have opened the floodgates for separatist movements across the region, including in Iran.[34]

Second, Iran worked closely with nonstate actors, which it trained, advised, and assisted to counter ISIS and regain control of lost territories. By doing so, it hoped to create alternative entities able to step in if the central authority were to collapse and to avoid a Sunni-controlled government in Iraq while ensuring continued Iranian influence.[35] In that sense, Iran's support for its nonstate partners in Iraq was a driver behind its decision to intervene in Iraq in addition to a means employed by Iran to counter ISIS.

The distinct external threat posed by ISIS also affected the options for *how* Iran intervened in Iraq. The Islamic Republic has long repelled the domestic threat posed by various transnational terrorist groups by engaging in tactical cooperation with them. For example, Tehran tried to mitigate the threat posed by al-Qaeda to its security by providing the group with some minimal benefits, including access to its territory for the purpose of funneling money and operatives.[36] However, this part of Iran's regular counterterrorism toolkit—tactical cooperation—was rendered obsolete by ISIS.

The group's vehemently anti-Shia ideology, Iran's position as a top target for the group, and its degree of brutality removed this option from Iranian decisionmakers' toolkit. For Iran, the only viable method by which it could counter the group was to combat it. Qassem Soleimani, before his death, and other Iranian commanders have long argued that the "best defense" is offense—a lesson they learned in the

---

[34] Erin Cunningham, "Iran's Leaders Opposed Kurdish Independence Vote in Iraq. Iran's Kurds Celebrated on the Streets," *Washington Post*, September 26, 2017; and Raya Jalabi, "Iran Seen as Winner After Iraq's Kurds Lose Referendum Gamble," Reuters, October 31, 2017.

[35] Arango and Erdbrink, 2014; Ray Takeyh, "Iran's New Iraq," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 62, No. 1, Winter 2008, p. 14.

[36] Daniel Byman, "Unlikely Alliance: Iran's Secretive Relationship with Al-Qaeda," IHS Defense, Risk and Security Consulting, July 2012; and Nelly Lahoud, *Al-Qa'ida's Contested Relationship with Iran: The View from Abbottabad*, Washington, D.C.: New America, August 20, 2018.

Iran-Iraq War.[37] To a large degree, this idea stems from the nation's and these individuals' experiences of the Iran-Iraq War. Iran's threshold for an acceptable level of instability in Iraq was thus much lower than it was in Syria. Although Iran considered simply containing ISIS in Syria, it sought to eliminate ISIS in Iraq.[38]

Gradually, ISIS began to directly target Iran, legitimizing Tehran's concerns about this external threat. In 2016, for instance, the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security disclosed a foiled ISIS plot to conduct a substantial terrorist attack in Iran, involving bombings in 50 different targets in Tehran and using 100 kg of explosives.[39] After this plot failed, Iranian authorities disclosed ISIS recruitment efforts in the Iranian Kurdish border regions.[40] On several occasions, the group recruited operatives in those areas and built sleeper cells, which would be leveraged for future attacks on Iranian targets.[41] In summer 2017, ISIS successfully conducted its first attack in Iran: a twin attack in Tehran that hit the Iranian parliament and the mausoleum of the Islamic Republic's founder and first supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini.[42] These attacks were as high-profile as they were unexpected. They further highlighted the importance of a military intervention in Iraq for counterterrorism.

On the other hand, some evidence suggests that the external threat posed by ISIS may have been exaggerated and thus less of a critical factor than is commonly assumed. Critically, Tehran has long used counterterrorism as an excuse to build influence beyond its borders and crush domestic dissent. Hence, there are limits to the veracity of Iran's narrative that its efforts in the counter-ISIS campaign were solely

---

37 Ali Akbari-Mazdabadi, *Hajj Qassem: A Quest in Hajj Qassem Soleimani's Memoirs*, Tehran: Ya Zahra Publishers, 2015, p. 165.

38 Khamenei, 2016.

39 "Video: Iran Raids Takfiri Lair in Tehran," *PressTV*, June 22, 2016.

40 Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, "Iran Smashes 'Terrorist Cell', Warning of Threat from Islamic State," Reuters, November 18, 2015.

41 Sharafedin, 2015.

42 Thomas Erdbrink and Mujib Mashal, "At Least 12 Killed in Pair of Terrorist Attacks in Iran," *New York Times*, June 7, 2017.

about ISIS: Instead, the regime formulated external threat justifications to legitimize its involvement beyond its borders.

Factor 2: Regional Power Balance and Stability

The likelihood of a 2014 Iranian intervention in Iraq was also strongly affected by geopolitical considerations pertaining to regional power balance and stability. A military intervention would enhance Iran's ability to shape the geopolitical alignment of one of the most important countries in the Middle East and would ensure that it remained a powerful broker in regional counter-ISIS efforts for years to come, a gain that Tehran would seek to leverage following the U.S. reimposition of sanctions on its economy and efforts to isolate the country politically.[43] Simultaneously, Iran's exertion of military power would ensure that Iraq did not become dominated by the influence of the United States and regional rivals, such as Saudi Arabia.

Geostrategically, the intervention might also secure freedom of access to Syria and Lebanon, via a land bridge through northern and/or western Iraq, allowing Iran to support its main proxy, Hezbollah, and gain proximity to its chief regional adversary, Israel, more easily and at a lower cost.[44] By contrast, if ISIS were to succeed even partially in its territorial goals by partitioning Iraq into separate Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish states, the power dynamics of the region might be altered irrevocably in Iran's disfavor and threaten broader regional instability, particularly in the Kurdish regions of Iran, Syria, and Turkey.[45] These geopolitical stakes thus increased the likelihood of an Iranian intervention in Iraq to secure and expand its influence in the Arab world, thereby altering the balance in its favor.[46]

---

43 "Maneuver-e qodrat-e Iran va Iraq moqabel-e America," *Javan Online*, March 14, 2019.

44 Shahram Akbarzadeh, "Iran and Daesh: The Case of a Reluctant Shia Power," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 22, No. 3, Fall 2015, p. 45.

45 Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 2015, p. 7.

46 Pollack, 2017, p. 1.

At the same time, regional power balance factors were equally significant in affecting the *way* in which Iran decided to intervene in Iraq. Iran was not invited to join a U.S.-led international coalition with formidable conventional capabilities, and it did not wish to do so. Instead, as the United States and its allies were sending highly visible ground, air, and naval contingents to Iraq, Iran appeared only to be cooperating through its local partners. Major General Soleimani, who Iran presented as the public relations face of the counter-ISIS efforts on the ground, was not photographed or recorded appearing in armored vehicles or sophisticated weapons.[47] Instead, he was characterized as a powerful yet humble leader who navigated the battlefield with ease and without fear, wearing street clothes and visiting local partners as they were supposedly in the midst of battle. He posed with Iranian-backed local forces without even holding a gun.[48]

These decisions helped project an image of Iran, at least in some international and domestic outlets, as an independent regional power leading several local forces (composed mostly of nonstate actors, such as the Shia militias), rather than an image of Iran following its great adversary—as Iran's Gulf state rivals were seen as doing. And Soleimani's public and media appearances were indeed designed to project power: Iran did not need fancy weapons to be effective; Soleimani could do what the United States and its partners were doing without gadgets and billions of dollars. Biased or not, Iranian state media successfully seized the opportunity (at least among parts of the domestic audience) to contrast the coalition footprint with Soleimani's local campaign, largely attributing the spread of ISIS attacks in the West—and the comparative absence of ISIS attacks in Iran—to these differences. As a hardline Iranian media outlet boasted, Belgium and France, which did not share any borders with Iraq and whose territories were tucked away many miles away from the battlefront, had become the target of terror-

---

47 For example, see this propaganda video published by *Mashregh News*, which includes footage of Soleimani on the battlefront with local partners: "Tasavir-e didehnashodeh az Sardar Soleimani dar jang ba Daesh," Masregh News, November 22, 2017.

48 "Tasavir-e didehnashodeh az Sardar Soleimani dar jang ba Daesh," 2017.

ist attacks by ISIS operatives.[49] Both countries' capitals had witnessed "heartbreaking events," while Iran had managed to repel the neighboring threat, a feat the outlet attributed in large part to Soleimani. Citing an Iranian military commander, the outlet claimed, "Without Iran's help, ISIS would have occupied Iraqi Kurdistan and we must say this clearly, Commander Soleimani stopped ISIS terrorists in Erbil with 70 individuals."[50]

Importantly, Iran's counter-ISIS operations sent a signal to its adversaries in the region and beyond: Tehran had the means to pursue its agenda and was perhaps the only one to do so independently from a great power. Unlike its Gulf state rivals working to support U.S.-led efforts in Iraq, Iran was leading its own efforts. At the same time, the intervention allowed Iran to demonstrate its ability to project military power to several key regional countries: In Iraq, it was an important contributor to the counter-ISIS campaign even as it deployed troops to Syria, maintained support to its proxies in Lebanon, and slowly built up its support for the Houthis in Yemen, where it was bogging down a chief regional rival, Saudi Arabia, whose U.S.-made weapons and coalition of Arab allies could not defeat the Iranian-backed rebels. Iran's involvement in these conflicts all at once would serve to bolster the country's regional clout. As Iranian hardliners would claim (with criticism from moderates), their country was now in control of four Arab capitals: Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus, and Sana'a.[51] Although inaccurate, this talking point would also gain traction in the region and in the United States, with many lamenting Iran's expansion.

By the time ISIS was losing its territorial caliphate in 2016, Iran had made significant gains in Iraq and had seemingly improved its relative position in the balance of power in its favor in the region. Photos of Iranian forces helping secure and stabilize Iraq were widely disseminated on various social media platforms, highlighting Tehran's

---

49 "Faseleh-ye Daesh az 'marzha-ye Iran' cheghadr ast? + naqsheh va tasvir," *Bashgah-e khabarnegaran-e javan*, March 30, 2016.

50 "Faseleh-ye Daesh az 'marzha-ye Iran' cheghadr ast? + naqsheh va tasvir," 2016.

51 Samia Nakhoul, "Iran Expands Regional 'Empire' Ahead of Nuclear Deal," Reuters, March 23, 2015.

desire to capitalize on the intervention as an opportunity to improve its regional image.[52] As noted earlier in this chapter, Quds Force commander Soleimani was at the heart of these public relations efforts targeting foreign (and domestic) audiences (both friendly and adversarial). Iran also showcased Soleimani's comprehensive ties with various groups in Iraq for the world to see, thus sending another key message: Iran was on the ground and working alongside various groups (Kurds, Sunnis, and Shias alike). By doing so, Tehran tried to undercut its image as a sectarian player, which could stymie its efforts in the region. At the same time, Iran strengthened its access and influence in other areas; for instance, it helped stabilize Iraq by building economic and trade ties, which also served to assert Tehran as a key player there.[53] Iran also used the intervention to help secure a regional land bridge through northern Iraq and into Syria and Lebanon, a key geostrategic access objective.[54]

That the intervention resulted in significant (if only tentative) gains in Iranian political and economic influence suggests that considerations about regional power balance may factor into Tehran's future decisions regarding where, why, and whether to intervene militarily.[55] A July 2017 *New York Times* report illustrates the depth and breadth of the influence Iran had achieved in Iraq, at least in part as a result of combined military operations against ISIS: "[I]n the halls of power in Baghdad, even the most senior Iraqi cabinet officials have been blessed, or bounced out, by Iran's leadership."[56] And many individuals affiliated

52 At one point in 2016, Instagram even blocked Soleimani's account (Oded Yaron "No Selfies for Soleimani: Instagram Briefly Blocks Iranian General's Account," *Haaretz*, May 27, 2016.

53 Tim Arango, "Iran Dominates in Iraq After U.S. 'Handed the Country Over,'" *New York Times*, July 15, 2017; "Toseeh-ye ravabet-e eqtesadi-e Iran va Iraq edamdeh darad," *Iranian Students News Agency*, July 6, 2019; and Tamer Badawi, "Iran's Economic Leverage in Iraq," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 23, 2018.

54 Jones, 2019, p. 5.

55 "Toseeh-ye ravabet-e eqtesadi-e Iran va Iraq edamdeh darad," 2019.

56 Arango, 2017; Tim Arango, James Risen, Farnaz Fassihi, Ronen Bergman, and Murtaza Hussain, "The Iran Cables: Secret Documents Show How Tehran Wields Power in Iraq," *New York Times*, November 18, 2019.

with Iran's proxies were now becoming an integral part of the country's security forces. Iran was also increasingly dominating the Iraqi political and economic landscapes:

> Walk into almost any market in Iraq and the shelves are filled with goods from Iran – milk, yogurt, chicken. Turn on the television and channel after channel broadcasts programs sympathetic to Iran. A new building goes up? It is likely that the cement and bricks came from Iran . . . Politically, Iran has a large number of allies in Iraq's Parliament who can help secure its goals . . . Perhaps most crucial, Parliament passed a law last year that effectively made the constellation of Shiite militias a permanent fixture of Iraq's security forces. This ensures Iraqi funding for the groups while effectively maintaining Iran's control over some of the most powerful units . . . To gain advantage on the airwaves, new television channels set up with Iranian money and linked to Shiite militias broadcast news coverage portraying Iran as Iraq's protector and the United States as a devious interloper.[57]

Tehran achieved these relative gains in regional power against the backdrop of its ongoing nuclear negotiations with the international community. In this context, Iran recognized an opportunity to leverage its military assistance to improve its image as a responsible power, promoting regional security and stability. Iran (and its proxies) cooperated directly and indirectly with members of the U.S.-led coalition countering ISIS, albeit mostly quietly and covertly.[58] For example, Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security shared intelligence with countries within the coalition, such as Australia, to locate foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria.[59] More broadly, Iran's proxies in Iraq constituted a significant number of the pro-government forces fighting ISIS and were instrumental in the battles of Tikrit and Amerli, allowing Tehran

---

57 Arango, 2017.

58 Arango and Erdbrink, 2014; Helene Cooper, "U.S. Strategy in Iraq Increasingly Relies on Iran," *New York Times*, March 5, 2015.

59 Matt Brown, "Islamic State: Julie Bishop Brokers Intelligence Sharing Deal with Iran on Australians Fighting in Iraq," *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, April 19, 2015.

to cement its place as an important player in the counter-ISIS efforts and in the region more broadly.[60]

Nevertheless, although Iran (from its perspective) intervened in Iraq in part to ensure a favorable balance of power, in many ways it achieved just the opposite by fueling other nations' security dilemmas. Iranian leadership likely weighed backlash effects from its increased interventions and expansion of its proxies: specifically, the potential for deeper regional isolation and broader balancing by such governments as Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain.[61] Moreover, Iran's intervention in Iraq, coupled with its broader regional activities, exacerbated sectarian tensions in the region. Although sectarianism helps secure the Islamic Republic's short-to-medium-term interests, given the general disposition of the region, it may undermine long-term interests.

Factor 3: Alliance or Partnership with Host

Tehran's partnership with Baghdad in the post-Saddam era—particularly after the U.S. withdrawal in 2011—was another important factor shaping the decision to intervene militarily to counter the rise of ISIS. Although the two countries had signed more than 100 cooperation agreements between the fall of Saddam and early 2010, Iran was not compelled to intervene because of formal or informal mutual defense obligations.[62] Rather, the decision to do so was rooted in Tehran's desire to maintain and nurture the nascent client-state relationship it was building. The intervention was implicitly conducted in partnership with and on behalf of Iraq's Shia-dominated government and Shia militias and often against Iraq's Sunni minority. As Kenneth Pollack describes, the complex partnership changed significantly between the end of the U.S. surge in Iraq and the rise of ISIS, with the government led by Nouri al-Maliki growing increasingly dependent on Ira-

60 Cooper, 2015.

61 Jones, 2019, p. 11.

62 Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 2015, p. 4.

nian patronage for survival: "Although he was routinely dismissed as an Iranian puppet, Maliki himself loathed the Iranians, took pride in driving them from the country in 2008 and only grudgingly accepted their influence again when it became the only way for him to retain power in 2010, 2012 and again in 2014."[63]

Iran had decent, if not complex and sometimes contradictory, relations with the Iraqi government when ISIS began to take over swaths of territory in the country in 2014. However, it did not see the Iraqi security forces as a viable partner in the counter-ISIS fight. The stakes raised by the ISIS threat were too great to allow Baghdad to operate by itself; indeed, the Iraqi forces lacked the will, cohesion, and capabilities to effectively fight the group and crumbled in a matter of days.[64] Additionally, even as it felt the ISIS threat acutely, Iran was concerned about the long-term implications of supporting the Iraqi government in its counter-ISIS fight. Tehran found itself in a position in which it needed to support the central authority to counter the threat of ISIS, which threatened Iranian soil in the short-term, while making sure Baghdad did not become strong and independent enough to undermine Iranian influence there in the long term.[65]

At the beginning of the crisis, therefore, maintaining and shaping the Iranian-Iraqi partnership was a critical factor in the decision to intervene. Few, if any, leaders in Tehran likely believed that Iraq could be "reduced to an Iranian vassal." They more likely viewed an Iranian intervention as helpful in creating a "strong, unified Iraq that is a staunch ally of—and somewhat dependent on—Iran," similar to the Lebanese-Iranian relationship since 2005.[66] The loss of a Shia-

63 Kenneth M. Pollack, "Iranian Airstrikes in Iraq Are a Warning and a Sign of Progress," *Markaz*, Brookings Institution blog, December 3, 2014.

64 Matt Schiavenza, "Why Iraq's Military Has No Will to Fight," *The Atlantic*, May 25, 2015; and Eric Schmitt and Tim Arango, "Billions from U.S. Fail to Sustain Foreign Forces, *New York Times*, October 13, 2015.

65 Nader, 2015, p. 5.

66 Pollack, 2017, p. 3.

dominated partner (or client) government would constitute a blow to Iranian influence.[67]

The fragile state of the Iranian-Iraqi partnership in 2014 may also have factored into arguments *not* to intervene. It is likely that Tehran was wary of overplaying its influence among both the political elite and average Iraqi Shiites, as well as possibly triggering a nationalist Iraqi reaction resulting in the state's partition. In other words, although preserving the influence and client-state partnership that the Iranians had patiently built since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion was clearly a decisive factor in sending troops to Iraq, the move also risked backfiring on the precarious political partnership.

Recent fieldwork suggests that this risk is in fact what occurred between 2014 and 2018: Whereas "Iran's popularity increased significantly in Iraq from 2003 until 2014, . . . new public opinion survey evidence shows that Iran's honeymoon with Iraqi Shiites is rapidly fading."[68] According to polling conducted by the Al-Mustakella research group, for instance, the share of Iraqi Shiites who identified Iran as a "reliable partner" decreased from 76 percent to 43 percent between 2015 and 2018, while the share of Iraqi Shiites holding a "favorable attitude toward Iran" decreased from 88 percent to 47 percent over the same period. The number of Iraqi Shiites who viewed Iran as a "real threat to Iraqi sovereignty" increased from 25 percent to 58 percent between 2016 and 2018.[69]

Another important development strengthening the Iranian resolve to preserve the central authority in place came in 2017, when Iraqi Kurds launched an initiative to gain independence from the Iraqi state through a referendum. This briefly complicated what looked like a fairly successful track record by the Iraqi government, the international

---

67 Nima Adelkhah, "Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Iraq's Security Breakdown," *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 12, No. 14, July 10, 2014, p. 8.

68 Munquith al-Dagher, "Iran's Influence in Iraq Is Declining: Here's Why," *Washington Post,* November 16, 2018.

69 This study found that the reciprocal trends held in parallel: Between 2015 and fall 2018, the percentage of Iraqi Shiites believing Iran was *not* a reliable partner jumped from 24 percent to 55 percent, and unfavorable attitudes toward Iran jumped from 6 percent to 51 percent. See al-Dagher, 2018.

coalition, and Iran in preserving Iraqi territorial integrity and national unity. Indeed, by September 2017, when the referendum took place, it appeared that the Kurds were making some progress toward the establishment of an independent Kurdistan, a deeply chilling development for Iran, which saw a territorially intact Iraq as fundamental to its security. Hence, following the Kurdish announcement of the independence referendum, Iran undertook several steps to stymie any progress toward the secession of Iraqi Kurdistan.

The Iranians supported the Iraqi central government's efforts to render the referendum useless. As part of these efforts, Iran dispatched Soleimani to hold talks with the Kurds. Soleimani, for example, held meetings with the president of the Kurdistan Region, Masoud Barzani, prior to the referendum to gauge the situation and, presumably, advise Barzani to postpone the plebiscite.[70] Iran also conducted drills in the border region, where the Kurds on the Iraqi side were hoping to create a new independent Kurdistan and where Iran's Kurdish population is predominantly concentrated. As part of these drills, the Artesh air force provided cover to the IRGC ground forces, and the Revolutionary Guards conducted exercises using missiles and drones.[71]

Factor 4: Co-Identity Group Populations in Host

Iran and Iraq share deep ethnic and religious ties. These ties make Iraq one of the most, if not the most, significant states in the Middle East for Iran. With a population of 20 million, Iraqi Shias constitute roughly 60 percent to 75 percent of Iraq's population, making it home to the second-largest Shia population in the world after Iran.[72] This

---

70 "Barzani: Hameporsi-e esteqlal-e Kordestan bargozar mishavad ta khast-e mardom maaloum shaved," *BBC Persian*, September 24, 2017.

71 "Jozeeyat-e razmayesh-e Sepah-e Pasdaran dar marzha-ye gharbi-e keshvar," *Tasnim News*, September 24, 2017; "Parvaz-e jangandeha-ye Artesh dar marz-e gharbi-e keshvar," *Tasnim News*, September 25, 2017.

72 Pew Research Center, *Mapping the Global Muslim Population: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Muslim Population*, Washington, D.C., October 2009; and Michael Eisenstadt, Michael Knights, and Ahmed Ali, "Iran Influence in Iraq: Countering

population constitutes an important political constituency for Tehran. Additionally, Iraq is home to two of the world's holiest Shia sites, the cities of Karbala and Najaf, to which millions of Iranians flock annually in religious pilgrimage.

For decades, the Iraqi Shia constituency had been effectively sidelined and repressed by a secular autocrat representing the Sunni majority. Saddam distrusted Iraqi Shias, viewing them as vulnerable to Iran's influence.[73] As a 2004 report in the *New York Times* put it, "With the Baath Party destroyed and Hussein captured, the Shiites are restless for power."[74] As described in greater detail earlier, Iran, which had for decades cultivated ties with Iraqi Kurds and Shias, moved quickly to assert itself in Iraq and ensure that the new government would include individuals and factions friendly toward Tehran.[75]

With the rise of ISIS, protection of these co-identity populations became a major driver behind intervention.[76] The first Iranian troops deployed, in part, to protect holy sites in Najaf and Karbala. Likewise, Iran was reportedly the first country to supply the Kurds with weapons to fight ISIS.[77] The presence of co-identity group populations in the host country was an important factor in the Iranian decision of whether to intervene in Iraq and affected *how* the intervention was waged. Iran leveraged its demographic ties with nonstate actors in Iraq to simultaneously support and undermine Baghdad. Yet Iran's support for co-identity groups has produced some mixed results in Iraq since

---

Tehran's Whole-of-Government Approach," Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 2011, pp. ix–x.

By contrast, some 90 percent to 95 percent of Iran's population of more than 80 million are Shia Muslims. Millions of Iran's Shia Muslim population make religious pilgrimages to the Iraqi holy cities of Karbala and Najaf each year (Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook: Iran," updated June 26, 2019).

73 David Rieff, "The Shiite Surge," *New York Times*, February 1, 2004.

74 Rieff, 2004.

75 Reisinezhad, 2019, p. 2; Thom Shanker and Steven R. Weisman, "Iran Is Helping Insurgents in Iraq, U.S. Officials Say," *New York Times*, September 20, 2004.

76 Adelkhah, 2015, p. 2.

77 Arango and Erdbrink, 2014.

2014, which may influence the relative importance of this factor in future Iranian decisions to intervene militarily in Shia-majority states.

On the one hand, by leveraging co-identity group populations, Tehran has become an important facilitator and broker in Iraq. Tehran has been able to successfully broker deals and help settle disputes among various stakeholders in Iraq.[78] Prior to his 2020 assassination, Soleimani was involved in deliberations in the Iraqi government, with his reach even trickling down to the operational domain. For example, the Quds Force was instrumental in facilitating coordination between several key forces—including the Kurdish Peshmerga, the Iraqi military, and the Shia militias—working jointly on the ground to break the Amerli siege in 2014.[79] Therefore, co-identity group populations were instrumental to Iran's ability to grow in influence and project power in Iraq.

On the other hand, Iran's ties to co-identity group populations were also a shortcoming of the Iranian intervention in Iraq. For example, although Iranian forces were able recruit and cooperate with Shias and Kurds, their attempts to avoid appearing as a sectarian player by forging ties with Sunnis yielded only limited results. Despite some efforts, Iran was not able (by Iranian officials' own admission) to recruit more than just a few hundred Sunnis to support its intervention in Iraq and to cooperate against ISIS.[80] The obvious lack of Iranian ties to non-Kurdish Sunnis and Iran's nearly exclusive support for Shias only further exacerbated Iran's image as a sectarian player in the region.

Iran's support for co-identity group populations has also revealed challenges as some of these groups, emboldened by their participation in the conflict, have sought to assert themselves politically and to undermine and break away from the central authority, thus presenting a threat to Iran's primary objective of preserving Iraqi territo-

[78] Nader, 2015.

[79] Isabel Coles, "Iranians Play Role in Breaking IS Siege of Iraqi Town," Reuters, September 1, 2014b.

[80] Ariane M. Tabatabai and Dina Esfandiary, "Cooperating with Iran to Combat ISIS in Iraq," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 3, 2017, p. 132.

rial integrity and national unity. For example, the Kurdish decision to hold a referendum to create an independent Kurdistan was seen as an important development, with implications that would far exceed Iraq's national status. For decades, Iran had supported the Kurds, and the Kurdish Democratic Party in Iraq was a key recipient (under two different systems of Iranian government with often opposing worldviews), and Iran was the first country to lend a hand to the Kurds when ISIS arose in Iraq.

The Kurds' strengthened political image and capital resulting from their military successes in the counter-ISIS fight (in part facilitated by Tehran) bolstered their claim for their own state. This, in turn, posed a significant challenge to Iran, which had long worked with Iraqi Kurds thanks to—but also despite—their connections to Iran's Kurdish minority, whose separatist elements the central authority feared. Soleimani traveled to Iraq on several occasions to warn the Kurds against moving forward with the secession plans: He reportedly told the Kurds that Iran would withdraw its strategic support for them and that there could even be conflict if they moved forward.[81]

The presence of co-identity group populations served as an important factor in the Iranian decision to intervene in Iraq, as it generally does in the country's decisions to intervene military outside its borders. These groups were also critical in shaping Iran's operations in Iraq, including determining Iran's footprint and the nature of its involvement. In part thanks to these groups, Iran was able to maintain a largely advisory role in the counter-ISIS campaign in Iraq, even as it had to put boots on the ground in Syria, because its partners in Syria lacked the capabilities of their Iraqi counterparts and did not have the support of the international coalition.

---

81 Michael Georgy and Ahmed Rasheed, "Iranian Commander Issued Stark Warning to Iraqi Kurds over Kirkuk," Reuters, October 20, 2017.

Factor 5: Domestic Politics and Legitimacy

Domestic political concerns were another factor affecting Tehran's decision to intervene in Iraq. According to Zogby polling conducted in September–October 2014 (just months after ISIS declared a caliphate), for instance, the Iranian public held a greater threat perception of ISIS than any of the seven other domestic audiences surveyed in the region, including the Iraqi public; 86 percent of Iranians polled in late 2014 considered ISIS a threat to Iran (of which 63 percent characterized ISIS as a "very grave threat"), and 85 percent considered ISIS a threat to the region (of which 53 percent characterized ISIS as a "very grave threat").[82]

The intervention was thus partially aimed to project power at home and comfort the Iranian population's threat perceptions, while signaling to the domestic audience that the Iraqi government was key to Iranian stability and security. Soon after ISIS's advent in Iraq in 2014, Tehran adjusted its public relations strategy to reassure its population, whose memories of the Iran-Iraq War continue to haunt the Iranian psyche. Whereas the Iranian state media initially downplayed the threat posed by ISIS advances in June 2014, national news agencies quickly shifted their coverage to control the narrative, blaming foreign powers for the group's creation and arousing the population's threat perception.[83]

Among some Iranian constituencies, ISIS's rapid ascent triggered conspiratorial views—propagated in large part by Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and other regime officials and military commanders—that the group was specifically a U.S. creation designed to undermine the Islamic Republic's regional dominance, help the United States regain a grip on Iraq, and oust the Assad regime in Syria.[84] The decision to intervene was thus made in part in the context

82 The seven countries surveyed besides Iran were Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. See Zogby Research Services, 2014, p. 18.

83 Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 2015, p. 6.

84 Thomas Erdbrink, "For Many Iranians, the 'Evidence' Is Clear: ISIS Is an American Invention," *New York Times*, September 10, 2014; Adelkhah, 2015, p. 8.

of vocal "domestic critics who [saw] the rise of [ISIS] as evidence of an international conspiracy to undermine and ultimately destroy the Islamic Republic."[85] As detailed earlier, Tehran took concerted steps to develop a domestic public affairs strategy that showcased Quds Commander Soleimani as a national hero and presented Iranian forces as Iraq's protectors and "the savior of regional religious minorities targeted by ISIS."[86]

The domestic opinion results have been largely positive for the Iranian regime. In early 2016—about a year and a half after Iran first deployed Revolutionary Guards to Iraq—88 percent and 87 percent of Iranians supported their country continuing to help Iraqi Kurdish and Shiite groups, respectively, fight ISIS.[87] Similarly, according to polling conducted after the March 2016 parliamentary elections, a significant majority of Iranians wanted the government to increase its support of groups fighting ISIS (63 percent) and the role it plays in the region (67 percent).[88]

There is also evidence against the notion that public opinion and domestic politics factored into the Iranian decision to intervene in Iraq. First, it is hard to gauge Iranian public opinion and its impact on domestic politics and decisionmaking, for several reasons. As in all countries (particularly, autocratic states), the accuracy of public opinion polling is questionable. Moreover, although it does possess democratic components, the Iranian system is nonetheless autocratic, and its policy outputs are largely the product of internal bargaining within the elite. As a result, the Iranian regime is not fully accountable to the

---

85 Akbarzadeh, 2015, p. 44.

86 Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 2015, p. 5.

87 Ebrahim Mohseni, Nancy Gallagher, and Clay Ramsay, *Iranian Attitudes in Advance of the Parliamentary Elections: Economics, Politics, and Foreign Affairs*, College Park, Md.: Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland, January 2016.

88 The same March 2016 poll found even stronger support for increasing Iranian involvement in Syria (80 percent), participating in international talks to end the conflict in Syria (80 percent), and collaborating with other countries to end the conflict in Syria (87 percent), though only five in ten respondents expressed support for the Assad government (World Public Opinion, "Iran Poll Shows Rouhani Comes Out of Election with Broad-Based Support," March 31, 2016).

public. Similarly, the role of public opinion is limited (although not irrelevant). The policymaking process is opaque, and domestic political considerations when shaping decisions pertaining to military interventions are not transparent. Second, Iran was already involved in Iraq when ISIS gained ground there and simply shifted its strategic objectives and operations in the country. Hence, although the public sentiment vis-à-vis ISIS likely contributed to Iranian decisionmaking, the Iranian intervention in Iraq was probably not contingent on public opinion.

Factor 6: National Status Concerns

National status concerns comprise a more limited factor in the Iranian intervention in Iraq to counter ISIS. Iran has leveraged its contribution to the counter-ISIS campaign to present itself as a responsible power, whose efforts are instrumental in stopping a brutal terrorist organization (which, in the Iranian narrative, has been created according to Saudi ideology and thanks to funding from U.S. regional partners). As Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif argued on Twitter when the United States designated the IRGC as a Foreign Terrorist Organization:

> When @realdonaldtrump insisted that 'Iran is killing ISIS', exactly who did he think was doing the fighting & making the sacrifice? ISIS would've held two Arab capitals & fielded a Terrorist Army on Europe's doorstep had #IRGC not fought alongside brave peoples of Iraq & Syria.[89]

Although it is clear that Iran has tried to leverage its contribution to the counter-ISIS effort to enhance its prestige in the region and abroad, there is not enough evidence to suggest that this was a motivating factor. Instead, Iran may have seen the opportunity arise and made

---

89 Javad Zarif [@JZarif], "When @realdonaldtrump insisted that 'Iran is killing ISIS', exactly who did he think was doing the fighting & making the sacrifice? ISIS would've held two Arab capitals & fielded a Terrorist Army on Europe's doorstep had #IRGC not fought alongside brave peoples of Iraq & Syria." Twitter post, April 10, 2019.

the decision to seize it to present itself as a responsible power. In particular, the fact that ISIS rose in 2014, coinciding with the then ongoing nuclear talks between Iran and the world powers, afforded the country the opportunity to buy some goodwill from European capitals and the United States. Similarly, Iran sought to leverage the rise of ISIS and its role in the counter-ISIS campaign to signal to the West that, because the international community was facing more pressing issues, it should settle the distracting nuclear file to free up resources and attention to the counter-ISIS effort. For example, just days before the signing of the nuclear agreement, in an effort to push through the finish line and settle the nuclear file, Zarif noted,

> Our common threat today is the growing menace of violent extremism and outright barbarism . . . The menace we're facing—and I say we, because no one is spared—is embodied by the hooded men who are ravaging the cradle of civilization.[90]

Summary

The Iranian counter-ISIS campaign in Iraq since 2014 is a good example of Tehran's modus operandi with respect to its military interventions. The campaign largely leverages the Iranian playbook, relying mostly on an advisory mission to advance political objectives that are shaped largely by geopolitical and domestic factors. For Iran, ISIS presented a significant threat to its security. From Tehran's perspective, the implications from the rise of ISIS were immediate and severe. The likelihood of the conflict's spillover into Iran, ISIS efforts to recruit operatives and perpetrate attacks in the country, and the possibility of an Iraqi disintegration that would also create threats to Iranian territorial integrity and national unity were among the key considerations leading to an Iranian intervention in Iraq.

---

[90] "Zarif Video Message from Vienna," *Iran Primer*, United States Institute of Peace blog, July 3, 2015.

However, as the conflict progressed, it provided Iran with the opportunity to make gains beyond preserving the status quo. By 2018, Tehran had firmly secured its proxies in Iraq, some of which had entered the Iraqi political landscape and further entrenched Iran in Iraq. Adding to Iran's ability to project power was the fact that the country had intervened with and through local partners rather than as part of the U.S.-led international coalition countering ISIS. According to the Iranian narrative, Soleimani and his men were facing the same adversary as the United States and its partners. However, whereas the U.S.-led coalition (composed of world powers) was committing its state-of-the-art technology and employing heavy weaponry to fight the terrorist group, Iran worked mostly with its local partners.

Table 5.2 summarizes our analysis of the factors that were relevant to Iran's intervention in this case study.

Table 5.2
Summary of Analysis of Factors for Iranian Intervention in Iraq (2014–Present)

Factor Name	Evidence for Factor	Evidence Against Factor	Summary Assessment
External threat to sovereignty	• Gravity of threat (e.g., ISIS's rapid ascent, Iran and Iraq's porous borders, historical antagonism with Iraq, spill-over likelihood) • ISIS threat eventually manifested in attacks and recruitment efforts on Iranian soil	• ISIS threat possibly was exaggerated (intentionally or not); low probability Baghdad would have fallen, especially given U.S. support • Potential radicalizing effect of its operations among Sunnis; perpetuation and exacerbation of sectarian tensions and violence	• This factor probably most affected the likelihood of intervention
Regional power balance and stability	• Importance of maintaining political influence in Iraq, preventing partition or instability • Importance of remaining a broker against arguably the region's largest security threat and in Iraqi politics. • Prospect of access to land bridge	• Potential for greater regional isolation • Likelihood of Iran increasingly seen as playing a mostly negative role in the region by most stakeholders (except Lebanon and Syria) • Potential for broader balancing by regional rivals, such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco	• Factor affected whether to intervene • Factor affected how Iran intervened: not as part of U.S. coalition but leading local forces; high sensitivity to public relations strategy and images of forces

Table 5.2—Continued

Factor Name	Evidence for Factor	Evidence Against Factor	Summary Assessment
Alliance or partnership with host	• Development of proto-client state since 2003—but particularly since 2010	• Iran wary of client state becoming too strong • Sectarian blowback; resentment among Iraqi public contributing to downturn in political fortunes of pro-Iranian parties, such as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq	• The vectors of this factor arguably are the most difficult to assess because of the tension between the desirability of a strong versus weak Iraqi central government (and the evolution of Iran's position on this over four decades)
Co-identity group populations in host	• Iraq as second-largest Shia nation • Historical record of Iranian support for Iraqi Kurds • Importance of holy cities of Najaf and Karbala	• Potential backlash from some constituencies gaining strength (Kurdish separatists); potential backlash from non-identity group alienation • Risk of triggering nationalist Iraqi reaction, including perhaps calls for Iraq's partition	• Factor affected both whether and how to fight (e.g., visibility of Iranian troops)
Domestic politics and legitimacy	• Domestic polling showing high public threat perceptions of ISIS • Domestic audiences adopted conspiracy theories (propagated by state media) about U.S. role in forming ISIS	• State-controlled media arguably was capable of moderating public fears	• Tehran appears to have been quite sensitive to public opinion and crafted a sophisticated public relations campaign highlighting Soleimani as a national hero to stir a "rally-around-the-flag" effect

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

Iran's status as a U.S. adversary and a focus of U.S. defense planning since 1979 perhaps belies the fact that Tehran has rarely projected its state-controlled military units beyond its borders during this 40-year period. Despite the short list of historical cases available to draw on, our mixed qualitative and quantitative analysis allows us to infer conclusions about which geostrategic, domestic, and ideational factors have most significantly affected the likelihood of Iranian military interventions in the past. The analysis also revealed patterns about where, when, and how Iran typically deploys its armed forces, including historical trends in Tehran's propensity to deploy different types of military units (i.e., conventional or specialized) and engage in different types of activities (e.g., advisory and training, combat, deterrence). In this chapter, we conclude by synthesizing these findings into usable signposts for U.S. policymakers and U.S. Army strategic planners in particular.

Results of Analyses

At the outset, we identified ten possible factors with the potential to affect the likelihood of Iranian military interventions. The results of our literature review, quantitative investigations, and case studies point to several factors as more influential than the others in explaining the Iranian military interventions model: the presence of co-identity group populations in the host nation, opportunities to affect the regional power balance and stability, the perception of external threats, and the

existence of alliances or partnerships with the host government. The most important factors affecting the likelihood of Iranian interventions, perhaps contrary to conventional wisdom, are geopolitical and domestic in nature, not ideational or economic.

Several key conclusions can be drawn from this analysis (a summary of evidence for the factors leading to Iranian interventions can be found in Table 6.1). First, the presence of co-identity group populations appears to be nearly a prerequisite for Tehran's interventions. This is not to say that Iran supports all Shias and that all Shias work with Iran: History suggests that this has not been the case on at least several occasions, when Tehran has refrained from working with Shia groups because of conflicting interests and when some Shia groups have likewise preferred to steer clear of Iranian support. Moreover, Tehran has long supported several non-Shia groups, either because these entities had other links to Iran (ethnic, cultural, or linguistic, for example) or no such ties aside from some shared objectives and adversaries (the aforementioned instances of Iranian support for Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Taliban, for example).

However, in general and as discussed previously, all Iranian ground interventions identified in this study have occurred in theaters and countries with co-identity group populations.[1] This is in part because Iran's lack of conventional military assets, such as a strong air force, put it at a disadvantage vis-à-vis potential adversaries, leading it to forgo interventions in places where it does not have a capable local partner in place. Moreover, the Iranian leadership is concerned about stretching itself thin and paying a high price for its regional involvement, which could in turn further aggravate already heightened grievances stemming from economic difficulties among the populace. Hence, Tehran largely relies on advisory missions to support its nonstate partners and proxies in its military interventions and largely shies away from committing ground troops to other countries. For Tehran to be able to work with and through partners, it needs to have a natural audience, as

---

1 It is worth noting that some Iranian force deployments considered by the research team that did not make it in our universe of cases would have contradicted this finding had they met our threshold (Venezuela, Sudan, and the Balkans, for example).

Table 6.1
Summary of Evidence for Factors Driving Iranian Military Interventions

Factor Name	Evidence for Factor	Evidence Against Factor	Summary Assessment
National status concerns	In certain cases, prestige and national status concerns are clearly a driver behind Iranian decisions to intervene militarily. The antipiracy effort in the Gulf of Aden, Gulf of Oman, and Bab al-Mandab provides an example. Iran sees itself as a rightful regional power and heir to the Persian Empire, which, as Iranians see it, was not the creation of foreign powers but an organically established nation-state.	Iran mostly intervenes in advisory missions, which are often conducted covertly. Iran does not harbor revanchist territorial claims like Russia and China. Hence, Iran typically denies its involvement in foreign conflicts, undermining the merits of this factor as a significant driver behind Iranian interventions.	National status concerns do not constitute a major driver behind Iran's decision to intervene militarily, although they are a factor in some interventions.
Regional power balance and stability	Regional power balance and stability play a primary role in most of Iran's interventions because it seeks to project power and ensure a favorable balance of power.	Iranian interventions have not always been designed to enhance stability. At times, the regime uses the pursuit of stability as an excuse.	One of the strongest factors leading to Iranian intervention.
External threat to sovereignty	The threat of state and nonstate adversaries, including Saddam Hussein's Iraq and ISIS, has led to several Iranian interventions. Perceived external threat in some cases manifests in Iranian efforts to build military capabilities.	Iran at times inflates external threats to legitimize its interventions.	An important factor in Iranian interventions.
Alliance or partnership with host	Iran's near-isolation places a premium on preserving and protecting the few bilateral state-to-state relationships it has (e.g., Syria).	Although Iran does at times intervene in support of an allied or partner host nation, it more frequently intervenes to support nonstate partners. Iran is not bound by any formal mutual defense pacts or treaty obligations.	An important factor in Iranian military interventions.

Table 6.1—Continued

Factor Name	Evidence for Factor	Evidence Against Factor	Summary Assessment
Domestic politics and legitimacy	Leadership efforts to legitimize military interventions when they are known to the public and to mostly leverage covert operations indicate that domestic politics and legitimacy are a factor in Iranian military interventions.	Iranian rhetoric and state control over the news media may blunt or mitigate the effect of this factor. The opacity of the Iranian system and limits on free speech and freedom of the press make it difficult to assess this factor accurately and adequately.	A factor shaping the Iranian decision to intervene in conflict, whether to publicize involvement, and how to intervene.
Economic interests	Iran's naval intervention in the Gulf of Aden and Bab al-Mandab since roughly 2008 in an antipiracy mission is largely shaped by economic considerations. In the context of sanctions, interventions in Iraq (post-2003) and Syria also were partly motivated by securing and deepening economic ties and land lines of communication with Iran's few major trading and investment partners.	The antipiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and Bab al-Mandab provide the only real case for this factor. Although economic benefits may be a byproduct of some interventions, they are not a driving force behind the decision to intervene.	One of the weakest factors shaping Iran's decision to intervene.
Co-identity group populations in host	Iran has historically mostly intervened in an advisory capacity by working through and with proxies, which often belong to co-identity group populations.	Iran has, at times, refused to intervene on behalf or in support of co-identity group populations, particularly when it has perceived such involvement as countering its interests. For example, in the 1990s, Iran was reluctant to directly support Shia uprisings in Iraq and has generally sided with Christian Armenia over Shia-majority Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus conflict.	Perhaps the strongest factor associated with Iranian intervention.

Table 6.1—Continued

Factor Name	Evidence for Factor	Evidence Against Factor	Summary Assessment
Leadership and personality	There is some evidence that leadership and personality have played a role in shaping Iranian decisions on military interventions (mostly captured in the literature in the case of the Iran-Iraq War).	The literature on this factor remains poorly populated, and the opacity of the system makes it difficult to identify the key proponents and dissenters and the degree of their influence over the process as a whole.	Leadership and personality factor into Iranian decisionmaking. However, there is a dearth of research on the subject of the effect of personality and leadership on Iranian military interventions, and the opacity of the decisionmaking process (particularly as pertaining to military interventions) makes this factor difficult to assess.
Ideology	The literature considers ideology to be an important factor in Iranian decisionmaking on military interventions.	It is not clear that ideology shapes Iranian decisions to intervene as much as the leadership's rhetoric would suggest. Moreover, scholars have at times ascribed ideological intentions to Iranian decisionmakers. Much of the literature argues against ideology as a decisive factor in Iranian military interventions.	This is one of the more well-documented drivers behind Iran's interventions, although we found it to serve more as a means or secondary factor than a primary factor shaping Iranian military interventions decisions.
Military capabilities	Given how rarely Iranian conventional forces have deployed since the Iran-Iraq war, low-risk interventions are valuable opportunities for conventional and special forces to gain operational experience and combined fighting experience.	Iran's calculations regarding military capabilities differ from those of countries with significant conventional military power. As a conventionally inferior military, Tehran mostly relies on asymmetric and hybrid warfare to deter, contain, harass, and counter conventionally superior adversaries.	This factor does not seem to be a significant driver behind the Iranian decision to intervene. Instead, it might play a secondary role in shaping Iran's decision in some cases.

well as ethnic, religious, linguistic, and/or cultural ties that allow it to identity possible collaborators. As we discussed in Chapter Five, Iran has at times attempted to create a working relationship with governments and nonstate actors with which it does not share any cultural, ethnic, or religious ties. However, it has not been able to do so as successfully. Hence, Iran rarely intervenes outside of the areas in which it has co-identity group populations.

Regional power balance and stability is also a critical factor affecting the likelihood of adversary military interventions. Iran views itself as a fundamentally vulnerable state. It is a majority Persian and Shia nation in a predominantly Arab and Sunni region, where it has historically felt othered and often attacked. From Iran's perspective, unless the balance of power is in its favor, the country could once again become a target for adversarial forces, as was the case in the 1980s, when the unfavorable balance of power in the region encouraged and facilitated an Iraqi invasion of Iran, during which nearly all Middle Eastern powers sided with Baghdad over and against Tehran. Hence, the simple pursuit of the preservation of the status quo is not enough for Iran; the country seeks to tilt the balance of power in its favor, and it does so by leveraging co-identity group populations.

A key strategy pursued by Iran to ensure a favorable balance of power is to ensure that no central authority is strong enough to present a threat to or resist influence by Iran. Since the rise of ISIS, however, it has become clear to Iranian decisionmakers and military planners that a conflicting objective must also be achieved: ensuring that no central authority is too weak as to collapse and leave a power vacuum that can be leveraged by adversarial nonstate actors. These two strategies are difficult to balance because they can be at odds with one another.

Finally, external threats are an important factor in Iranian military interventions. Many of Iran's military interventions have resulted from an external threat perception caused by state or nonstate adversaries. External threats have also mostly resulted in more-overt demonstrations of military might by Tehran. For example, although Iran was less inclined to publicize its involvement in Iraq and Syria prior to 2014, it has become less reluctant to do so since the rise of ISIS, because it has been able to justify these interventions on the grounds that it is

responding to an external threat. This is not to say that external threats cannot also yield benefits. For Iran, some of the most acute threats in recent history have also provided tremendous strategic opportunities. The rise of ISIS, in particular, is an important example of a major external threat that was also an opportunity for Iran, allowing the country to project power, increase its strategic depth, cultivate non-state clients, and preserve and build its influence in key countries and beyond its borders.

Our investigations yielded two additional key takeaways about Iranian military interventions. First, they indicate that Iran almost always deploys special forces (mostly from the IRGC) rather than conventional ones and favors committing IRGC forces rather than Artesh personnel and troops to military interventions; the two notable exceptions are the Iran-Iraq War and Syria (although here, too, the IRGC led the operations, not the Artesh). Table 6.2 presents a breakdown of Iranian forces present in Syria and Iraq (as part of Iran's counter-ISIS efforts). It is important to note that the data available on these conflicts remain limited. Nevertheless, the existing data yield several takeaways. On the ground, the Iranian intervention in Syria was much larger in terms of the estimated number of forces deployed there and the different services involved in the country. Iraq is much more illustrative of typical Iranian interventions, with low numbers of IRGC forces on the ground, mostly in an advise-and-assist capacity. Other services are virtually absent from Iraq. However, both present certain similarities because they involve a small air component, mostly used for deterrence and composed of missile, rocket, and drone strikes.

Second, training and assistance has been a component of many Iranian military interventions, although Iranian forces have engaged in a variety of activities, the diversity of which is surprising given the limited number of Iranian interventions. Less surprising is Iran's little-to-no experience with or capability of projecting force beyond its region. The country lacks significant lift and transport capabilities, though it may have somewhat enhanced these capabilities thanks to its Syrian involvement. Perhaps more importantly, Iran also lacks any allies with significant lift and transport capabilities to help it project power beyond the near abroad (with perhaps the exception of Russia, which

Table 6.2
Breakdown of Iranian Forces in Syria and Iraq

Conflict	Start Year	End Year	Estimated Number of Forces (Low)	Estimated Number of Forces (High)	Estimated Number of Forces (Best)	Ground Forces	Air Forces	Naval Forces
Syrian civil war	2011	Ongoing	Fewer than 1,000	10,000	2,500	IRGC, Artesh, Basij	Small (Conducting limited airstrikes—predominantly missiles, rockets, drones)	None
Counter-ISIS Campaign (Iraq)	2014	Ongoing	Fewer than 1,000	5,000	2,400	IRGC	Small (Conducting limited airstrikes—predominantly missiles, rockets, drones)	None

NOTE: These are our research team's best estimates at the time of data collection. As discussed previously, the lack of adequate and accurate reporting limits our ability to produce completely reliable data using open-source analysis alone.

qualifies as a partner rather than an ally and only supports Iranian efforts when the two countries' strategic objectives align). In addition to the absence of capabilities, Iran is mostly interested in asserting itself as a regional rather than a global player. The country has had few naval interventions (most notably in the context of the Tanker War and the ongoing antipiracy mission in the Gulf of Aden, Gulf of Oman, and Bab al-Mandab) but has a track record of a persistent use of limited airstrikes. Overall, Iranian interventions (though few in number) and their aggressiveness appear to be increasing modestly, which may or may not indicate a growing risk tolerance in Tehran. Nevertheless, the overall deployed numbers remain small today, making it difficult to identify trends and patterns with as much confidence as in the Russian and Chinese cases examined in the companion volumes to this report.

Signposts of Iranian Military Interventions

These results point to several signposts that could allow policymakers and military planners to identify and anticipate Iranian military interventions going forward.

First, the presence of co-identity group populations is, of course, of predictive value in anticipating Iranian interventions. Co-identity groups provide a natural opening to Iran because they can lead to the cultivation of partnerships with state and nonstate actors. Iran is most inclined to intervene using the advisory model and usually leverages existing ties to develop a principle-agent relationship with proxies, which it can support during a conflict. We note that Syria presents a partial departure from this model, because Iran has also recruited nonlocal foreign fighters to deploy in combat. Nevertheless, for the foreseeable future, Tehran's most likely approach to advisory missions will remain centered on the use of local forces from co-identity group populations. Hence, when assessing where Iran may intervene militarily, the U.S. Army should focus closely on areas with significant populations sharing ethnic, religious, cultural, or linguistic ties to Iran.

Although the ubiquity of Shia populations throughout the Middle East may render this signpost of only limited utility for pre-

dicting future Iranian interventions in its near abroad, it is nonetheless a helpful signpost in that it highlights Iran's historical reluctance (in part because of constraints on its military capabilities) to intervene beyond the country's immediate neighborhood. And although Iran has become involved in countries without Shia populations (in some cases, where Tehran did not have co-identity groups whatsoever), it is telling that none of these conflicts made it into our universe of cases. Beyond the mere presence of coethnic populations, policymakers should look for more-specific events involving these groups as potential signposts. For example, changes in the political landscapes of countries that lead to an increase or decrease of the political power, welfare, and security of coethnic groups (such as major political upheavals including these groups; arrests of political dissidents associated with these populations; gains and losses of political positions, such as parliamentary seats; and increase or decrease of attacks on these populations) appear to affect the likelihood of Iranian interventions. For U.S. forces in the region seeking to protect key U.S. allies from attack by Iran, looking for threats to the status or safety of coethnic populations could serve as a key early indicator of future Iranian activity. The United States might also keep the status of these populations in mind when building ties and working with key partners in the region, because proactive efforts to prevent provocation might be a useful way to support regional stability.

Second, Iran is most likely to commit troops in combat when it views the conflict as representing an external threat that is critical to its national security and regime survival and when it views the conflict as fairly low cost and a quick win. When threats and opportunities emerge at once (as was the case in both our case studies), Iran has historically been most likely to intervene. The collapse of regional governments, civil wars, and the rise and expansion of terrorist threats in the region are among the key threats that also present opportunities and could lead to an Iranian intervention. Jihadist groups gaining ground present such a threat and offer such an opportunity, making it more likely that Iran will intervene (especially when combined with the first signpost: the presence of co-identity groups). This signpost also has important implications for U.S. forces operating in the region. Wherever it deploys forces overseas, the United States must balance

activities that are intended to deter with those that may be seen as provocative and threatening by adversaries. In the Middle East, this balance seems especially fragile and important to monitor. As the United States works to deter Iranian activities and build relationships with key regional allies, it should avoid actions that could be perceived as threats to Iranian sovereignty or as encroaching on Iranian borders. This does not mean that the United States should shy away from confrontation if needed or that it should let Iranian influence spread unchecked, but the United States may wish to avoid stepping over Iranian redlines and to consider carefully the types of exercises it runs and the types and amounts of equipment it sells to regional partners.

Notably, porous borders may add urgency to threats perceived by Iran and inject new opportunities. In addition, should Iran see a breakdown in order in key regional states (such as Saudi Arabia), it would likely have a strong incentive to intervene to gain leverage over the future disposition of a country that is central to the regional balance of power, even if the two countries do not share porous borders. In the case of key U.S. partners, U.S. forces in the region could act as a guarantor of stability, seeking to prevent new regional instability from triggering Iranian action.

Finally, Iran is more inclined to intervene in the region when doing so has the potential to tilt the balance of power in its favor. Hence, Iran is most likely to intervene in states where an Iranian intervention would produce potential leverage over their behavior and where doing so would be important to the regional balance, which in turn relies on the existence of a friendly government or influential nonstate partners. These states include those whose governments (or key nonstate actors) have served as Iranian allies or partners and countries whose alignment with Iranian rivals would negatively affect Tehran. However, Tehran is much more likely to intervene in those states with weak central authorities and important cleavages. Fragile and failed states and countries engaged in civil war are therefore particularly ripe for Iranian intervention. The relevance of this signpost also argues for maintaining a U.S. presence in the region, both to preserve stability and to support partners in the region with training and equipment that reduce their vulnerability to Iranian attack.

Implications for U.S. Army Planners

The U.S. Army is engaged in several theaters where Iranian forces and proxies are involved. In Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, both countries are operating in close proximity. The U.S. Army also has personnel and service members in the Persian Gulf region and in the broader Middle East. Hence, better understanding patterns and drivers of past Iranian interventions in the region is critical to U.S. Army planners' ability to anticipate (1) where and how Tehran can play spoiler, where its interests may align with those of the United States, and which arenas it may ignore altogether in ongoing operations in the region, and (2) if, when, where, and how the Army may confront Iran in the future.

Our analysis yields several key findings with implications for the U.S. Army (many of which confirm previous assumptions about Iranian military thinking). First, the U.S. Army is unlikely to need to plan for and prepare to respond to Iranian interventions beyond the greater Middle East. Since May 2019, Iran has undertaken several air and naval operations in the Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, and Gulf of Oman, as well as airstrikes directly or via proxies in the Arabian Peninsula and in Iraq. This trend of growing aggressive action by Tehran may indicate a new willingness to challenge U.S. power and interests in the region. However, absent any major changes to our underlying assumptions about Iranian behavior and interests, the United States is unlikely to witness or be required to respond to Iranian interventions beyond the Middle East.

Second, the trends and patterns in Iranian military interventions indicate that Tehran continues to view direct involvement in combat missions as largely undesirable. Hence, unless Iran sees a threat as particularly pronounced, it is unlikely to commit its conventional ground assets to countering the threat using force, preferring instead to work with and through proxies. Iran's track record of deploying troops in combat on only two occasions since 1979—the Iran-Iraq War and Syria—provides evidence for this trend. In the case of the Iran-Iraq War, committing troops to combat was necessary and largely undisputed domestically. However, the deployment in Syria was highly controversial. Therefore, the U.S. Army is much more likely to encounter

and engage with Iranian-backed nonstate partners in the region than it is to come face-to-face with Iranian personnel and troops.

Third, Iranian interventions are generally limited in scope and scale. This may stem from Iran's intentions as well as a lack of adequate conventional capabilities. Iran is more likely to deploy air (mostly missiles and drones) and naval assets than conventional ground troops. The last time Tehran engaged in a large-scale combat intervention was more than three decades ago, when the country was attacked during the Iran-Iraq War. Iran's largest intervention since that war took place in Syria. However, even there, Iran did not use large formations. Hence, the main threats facing American interests and partners and U.S. Army operations in the region most likely stem from Iran's missile and unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) programs rather than its ground forces.

There is little evidence that U.S. Army planners should need to prepare for large-scale Iranian ground interventions unless a major event changes the current international system or fundamentally alters the course of U.S.-Iran relations, including a potential U.S. attack on Iran or a potential Iranian acquisition of nuclear capabilities. Even if the Iranian intervention in Syria marks a new era of Iranian interventions rather than a sui generis case, Iran's interventions are unlikely to present a challenge the United States cannot tackle even at its current posture level. Instead, Iranian forces are most likely to intervene in tandem with proxies, which should warrant greater attention from U.S. military planners in terms of countering Iran. Tehran's interventions with and through proxies are most likely to have a third-party spoiler effect and complicate U.S. forward presence and military operations in the region via low-level activity, in contrast with the more limited direct threat of an Iranian large-scale military intervention in areas key to U.S. interests.

Fourth, the United States in general and the U.S. Army in particular would be well-served by considering the lessons of the previous two decades of U.S. involvement in the region, including its policies in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, because Iranian decisionmakers and military planners have studied key events and adjusted their policies accordingly. The combination of U.S. interventions in the region

over the past two decades and instability resulting from the collapse of central authorities has paved the path for Iranian involvement in key countries. As the Iranian track record of military involvement in Iraq shows, its interventions in Iraq were largely reduced to ad hoc airstrikes to target MeK and Kurdish positions there in the 1990s. However, following the 2003 U.S. intervention in Iraq, Iran gradually built its influence in that country. Overall, ethnic or sectarian tensions coupled with weak governments appear to facilitate Iranian interventionism. Accordingly, strong and inclusive central governments likely present an important bulwark against Iranian activities in the region.

The United States could use the signposts identified in this report to inform the use of military presence and activity in the region to deter Iran from undertaking a greater number of military interventions that threaten U.S. interests. In the short-to-medium term, the U.S. government in general and the U.S. Army in particular can leverage security cooperation with regional partners to prevent the weakening and collapse of central authorities and the threat of civil wars, which pave the way for Iranian involvement in the region. As noted earlier, particularly useful activities would be those that focus on capacity-building, such as training and transfer of equipment. The United States is already active in these areas with many of its regional partners, and additional effort and investment in these areas could be valuable. Increased numbers and types of exercises could have the dual purpose of increasing perceived readiness and actual readiness, deterring Iran on two fronts simultaneously. Another near-term area of focus would be supporting jointness among regional allies so that they can operate more effectively as a unit against regional threats from Iran. Multilateral training initiatives alongside regional, political, and military cooperation could be effective in building stronger defense to Iranian provocation and activities. Because our analysis suggests missile and UAV attacks are especially likely, emphasis on training and technology to defend against these threats may be important focal points of enhanced training and efforts at regional multilateral cooperation. This type of increased security cooperation activity could serve as a deterrent to Iranian intervention that has limited cost and requires limited additional investment of personnel or resources, given efforts to draw down U.S.

forces in the region. Such an approach would also allow for a visible U.S. presence that would enhance the deterrent signal.

In the medium-to-long term, the United States can promote more-inclusive policies in the region. More-inclusive governments whose populations do not harbor significant grievances that can be exploited by Iran can serve as a bulwark against Iranian military interventions in the region. The U.S. Army can, for example, use its military assistance as an incentive to help its partners behave more inclusively or to support policies that bolster inclusivity. Security cooperation activities that build the capacity of partner militaries (described earlier in some detail) represent one potential way to build inclusive practices in the region without presenting a direct, escalatory threat. Especially important will be ensuring the inclusion of minority Shia populations in both governance and military activities in countries with majority Sunni populations and leadership, because the exclusion of these groups can make a country the target of Iranian activity.

More-inclusive governments may also reduce the risk of civil war or at least lessen instability in the region, further reducing vulnerabilities that attract Iranian intervention. This may also be an area where partnerships between the U.S. military and nongovernmental organizations could be valuable in building state capacity throughout the region and limiting opportunities for future Iranian intervention.

This report can also inform decisions about U.S. posture in the region and efforts to ensure that U.S. forces are positioned most effectively to deter without provoking. U.S. forces in the region have a complex task in dealing with Iranian militarized behavior. Direct Iranian military interventions have become notably more frequent following the sharp increase in U.S. presence after the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq. In part, this reflects opportunism by Iran, seizing the opportunity to expand its influence in an increasingly chaotic region, but it has also been defensive in nature, seeking to increase its leverage to deter a feared U.S. strike on Iran using these same forces. If U.S. forces in the region needed only to be concerned about direct Iranian military interventions against U.S. partners, such as Kuwait or the Gulf states, then they could likely help to enhance deterrence with only limited size and capabilities, focusing on anti–unmanned aerial system

and missile capabilities, as noted earlier. Iran has shown a clear reluctance to commit its conventional forces to direct combat missions, and the prospects of a large-scale Iranian attack on a U.S. partner or ally appear remote. However, Iran's use of informal or proxy groups, while not the subject of this study, has often been substantially more opportunistic and aggressive than its use of its formal military. U.S. forces in the region must deal with the risk of these types of Iranian activity as well, which may require a larger footprint and the ability to assist partners with advisory, training, and counterinsurgency capabilities. However, such forces need not necessarily be postured close to Iran's borders or be accompanied by higher-end conventional capabilities that would be seen as particularly threatening by Iran and that could contribute to an escalation spiral, as both sides already experienced in January 2020.

Finally, we note that some factors, both internal and external, may change the Iranian way of war (with implications for the preceding analysis). U.S. decisionmakers and military planners should track these developments and factors to ensure that the nature and threat posed by Iranian interventions does not fundamentally change without changes on the part of the United States to ensure continued U.S. readiness to respond. Internally, perhaps the most significant change in Iranian military affairs stems from the supreme leader succession. Khamenei's death and the following succession may have a deep effect on Iranian national security and defense thinking, including on the place and role of armed conflict, broad regional portfolios, and the dynamics between the clerical elements of both the regime and the armed forces on the one hand and the various branches of the armed forces on the other. Hence, U.S. policy and military planners should pay close attention to the preparations for succession and its possible impact on Iranian military thinking.

For example, the accession of an individual aligned with the IRGC (such as the hardline head of the judiciary, Ebrahim Raisi) may lead to an increased presence in the political realm by the Revolutionary Guards and their affiliates, fewer checks on their behavior, and the allocation of more resources to the force. Conversely, a more reform-minded individual (such as Rouhani) may be more inclined to empower the Artesh and impose more checks on the Revolutionary

Guards. Monitoring the trajectory of key candidates for the role and their ties to the Revolutionary Guards and positions on ongoing interventions will prepare the United States for any eventuality.

Abroad, significant changes to the international system may change Iranian motives and catalyze a recalibrated military intervention approach. The future of (1) great-power competition and how it plays out in the Middle East and (2) the regional landscape are important factors that will shape how Iran sees its military activities. Increased Chinese and Russian military and economic presence in the region is likely to factor into Iranian calculations regarding the regional balance of power, as is the dynamic between Beijing, Moscow, and Washington. Although a move away from a period of greater U.S. power in the region would seem to provide fewer threats and more opportunities for Iran, the relations among these key states and how they affect Iranian perceptions of the regional balance of power bear careful monitoring.

References

Abdulghani, J. M., *Iraq and Iran: The Years of Crisis*, Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984.

Abdulrahim, Raja, and Benoit Faucon, "Iran Moves to Cement Its Influence in Syria," *Wall Street Journal*, March 26, 2019.

Adelkhah, Nima, "Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Iraq's Security Breakdown," *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 12, No. 14, July 10, 2014, pp. 7–9.

———, "Iranian Intervention in Iraq Against the Islamic State: Strategy, Tactics, and Impact," *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 13, No. 2, January 23, 2015, pp. 9–11.

"Agar be Surieh komak nemikardim, qatan jang be dakhel-e keshvar keshideh mishod/asnad-e ma neshan midahad America Daesh ra ijad kard," *Mashregh News*, September 27, 2017. As of December 2, 2020: https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/779965/ اگر-به-سوریه-کمک-نمی-کردیم-قطعا-جنگ-به-داخل-کشور-کشیده-می-شد

"Aghaz-e bohran-e Surieh be revayat-e Shahid Hossein Hamedani," *Al-Alam*, December 26, 2016. As of August 7, 2020: https://fa.alalamtv.net/news/1902728/آغاز-بحران-سوریه-به-روایت-شهید-حسین-همدانی

Akbari-Mazdabadi, Ali, *Hajj Qassem: A Quest in Hajj Qassem Soleimani's Memoirs*, Tehran: Ya Zahra Publishers, 2015.

Akbarzadeh, Shahram, "Iran and Daesh: The Case of a Reluctant Shia Power," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 22, No. 3, Fall 2015, pp. 44–54.

al-Dagher, Munquith, "Iran's Influence in Iraq Is Declining: Here's Why," *Washington Post*, November 16, 2018.

Alfoneh, Ali, "Between Reform and Revolution: Sheikh Qassim, the Bahraini Shi'a, and Iran," American Enterprise Institute, Middle Eastern Outlook No. 4, July 2012.

———, *Iran Unveiled – How the Revolutionary Guards Is Turning Theocracy into Military Dictatorship*, Washington, D.C.: AEI Press, 2013.

———, "Tehran's Shia Foreign Legions," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 30, 2018. As of December 2, 2020:
https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/01/30/tehran-s-shia-foreign-legions-pub-75387

———, "Using Syria as a Training Ground: The Case of the Pakistani Zeinabiyoun Brigade," Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, July 17, 2018. As of December 2, 2020:
https://agsiw.org/using-syria-as-a-training-ground-the-case-of-the-pakistani-zeinabiyoun-brigade/

Allison, Graham T., and Morton H. Halperin, "Bureaucratic Politics: A Paradigm and Some Policy Implications," *World Politics*, Vol. 24, Supp. 1, Spring 1972, pp. 40–79.

Allison, Roy, "The Russian Case for Military Intervention in Georgia: International Law, Norms and Political Calculation," *European Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2009, pp. 173–200.

Almukhtar, Sarah, "Most Chemical Attacks in Syria Get Little Attention. Here Are 34 Confirmed Cases," *New York Times*, April 13, 2018. As of January 12, 2021:
https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/04/13/world/middleeast/syria-chemical-attacks-maps-history.html

Amir Arjomand, Said, *After Khomeini*, Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2009.

"Amir Pourdasatan tashrih kar joz'eyat-e hozoor-e Artesh-e Iran dar Araq va Surieh," *Fararu*, January 21, 2018. As of December 2, 2020:
https://fararu.com/fa/news/333412/جزئیات-حضور-ارتش-ایران-در-عراق-و-سوریه

Arango, Tim, "Iran Dominates in Iraq After U.S. 'Handed the Country Over,'" *New York Times*, July 15, 2017. As of December 3, 2020:
https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/15/world/middleeast/iran-iraq-iranian-power.html

Arango, Tim, and Thomas Erdbrink, "U.S. and Iran Both Attack ISIS, but Try Not to Look Like Allies," *New York Times*, December 3, 2014. As of December 3, 2020:
https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/04/world/middleeast/iran-airstrikes-hit-islamic-state-in-iraq.html

Arango, Tim, James Risen, Farnaz Fassihi, Ronen Bergman, and Murtaza Hussain, "The Iran Cables: Secret Documents Show How Tehran Wields Power in Iraq," *New York Times*, November 18, 2019.

"Artesh va Sepah behtarin sath-e ta'aamol ra darand," *Jam-e Jam*, April 18, 2018. As of December 2, 2020:
http://jamejamonline.ir/online/3259360005120634680/
ارتش-و-سپاه-بهترین-سطح-تعامل-را-دارند

Ashkenas, Jeremy, Archie Tse, Derek Watkins, and Karen Yourish, "A Rogue State Along Two Rivers," *New York Times*, July 3, 2014. As of December 3, 2020: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/07/03/world/middleeast/syria-iraq-isis-rogue-state-along-two-rivers.html

Associated Press, "Iranian Jets Bomb Kurdish Base in Iraq, Killing 1 and Hurting 3," *New York Times*, November 10, 1994. As of December 3, 2020: https://www.nytimes.com/1994/11/10/world/iranian-jets-bomb-kurdish-base-in-iraq-killing-1-and-hurting-3.html

Aubone, Amber, "Explaining US Unilateral Military Intervention in Civil Conflicts: A Review of the Literature," *International Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 2, 2013, pp. 278–302.

Ayatollahi Tabaar, Mohammad, "Factional Politics in the Iran-Iraq War," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 3–4, 2019, pp. 480–506.

Badawi, Tamer, "Iran's Economic Leverage in Iraq," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 23, 2018. As of January 8, 2021: https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/76436

"Barzani: Hameporsi-e esteqlal-e Kordestan bargozar mishavad ta khast-e mardom maaloum shaved," *BBC Persian*, September 24, 2017. As of December 2, 2020: http://www.bbc.com/persian/world-41380209

Bassam, Laila, "Assad Allies, Including Iranians, Prepare Ground Attack in Syria: Sources," Reuters, October 1, 2015. As of December 3, 2020: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-iranians-exclusi/assad-allies-including-iranians-prepare-ground-attack-in-syria-sources-idUSKCN0RV4DN20151001

Berinsky, Adam J., "Assuming the Costs of War: Events, Elites, and American Public Support for Military Conflict," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 69, No. 4, November 2007, pp. 975–997.

Black, Ian, "Iran Confirms It Has Forces in Syria and Will Take Military Action If Pushed," *The Guardian*, September 16, 2012. As of December 3, 2020: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/sep/16/iran-middleeast

"Bombaran-e Da'esh dar Araq va Surieh ba pahpadha-ye Sepah," *Tabnak*, November 21, 2018. As of December 2, 2020: https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/853876/بمباران-داعش-در-عراق-و-سوریه-با-پهپادهای-سپاه

Bove, Vincenzo, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Petros G. Sekeris, "'Oil Above Water': Economic Interdependence and Third-Party Intervention," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 60, No. 7, 2016, pp. 1251–1277.

Brecher, Michael, and Jonathan Wilkenfeld, *A Study of Crisis*, paperback ed., Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2000.

Brown, Matt, "Islamic State: Julie Bishop Brokers Intelligence Sharing Deal with Iran on Australians Fighting in Iraq," *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, April 19, 2015. As of December 3, 2020:
https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-04-20/julie-bishop-brokers-intelligence-sharing-deal-with-iran/6404624

Brumberg, Daniel, *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Bueno de Mesquita, Bruce, Alastair Smith, Randolph M. Siverson, and James D. Morrow, *The Logic of Political Survival*, paperback ed., Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005.

Bulloch, John, and Harvey Morris, *The Gulf War: Its Origins, History and Consequences*, London: Methuen, 1989.

Byman, Daniel, "Unlikely Alliance: Iran's Secretive Relationship with Al-Qaeda," IHS Defense, Risk and Security Consulting, July 2012.

Byman, Daniel, Shahram Chubin, Anoushiravan Ehteshami, and Jerrold D. Green, *Iran's Security Policy in the Post-Revolutionary Era*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MR-1320-OSD, 2001. As of December 3, 2020:
https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1320.html

Byman, Daniel, and Kenneth M. Pollack, "Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In," *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 4, Spring 2001, pp. 107–146.

———, "Beyond Great Forces," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2019. As of December 3, 2020:
https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-10-15/beyond-great-forces

Carment, David, and Patrick James, "Third-Party States in Ethnic Conflict: Identifying the Domestic Determinants of Intervention," in Steven E. Lobell and Philip Mauceri, eds., *Ethnic Conflict and International Politics: Explaining Diffusion and Escalation*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, pp. 11–34.

Cederman, Lars-Erik, Luc Girardin, and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, "Ethnonationalist Triads: Assessing the Influence of Kin Groups on Civil Wars," *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 3, June 2009, pp. 403–437.

Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook: Iran," updated June 26, 2019. As of December 3, 2020:
https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html

Charap, Samuel, Edward Geist, Bryan Frederick, John J. Drennan, Nathan Chandler, and Jennifer Kavanagh, *Russia's Military Interventions: Patterns, Drivers, and Signposts*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A444-3, 2021.

Charbonneau, Louis, "Exclusive: Iran Flouts U.N. Sanctions, Sends Arms to Syria: Panel," Reuters, May 16, 2012. As of December 3, 2020:
https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-sanctions-un/exclusive-iran-flouts-u-n-sanctions-sends-arms-to-syria-panel-idUSBRE84F14520120516

———, "Exclusive: Iran Steps Up Weapons Lifeline to Assad," Reuters, March 13, 2013. As of December 3, 2020:
https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-iran/exclusive-iran-steps-up-weapons-lifeline-to-assad-idUSBRE92D05U20130314

Chubin, Shahram, and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War*, London: I.B. Tauris, 1988.

———, *Iran–Saudi Arabia Relations and Regional Order*, London: Routledge, 2014.

Chulov, Martin, "Iran Sends Troops into Iraq to Aid Fight Against ISIS Militants," *The Guardian*, June 14, 2014.

Clarke, Colin, and Phillip Smyth, "The Implications of Iran's Expanding Shi`a Foreign Fighter Network," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 10, No. 10, November 2017, pp. 14–18.

Coles, Isabel, "Iran Supplied Weapons to Iraqi Kurds; Baghdad Bomb Kills 12," Reuters, August 26, 2014a. As of December 4, 2020:
https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-kurds/iran-supplied-weapons-to-iraqi-kurds-baghdad-bomb-kills-12-idUSKBN0GQ11P20140826

———, "Iranians Play Role in Breaking IS Siege of Iraqi Town," Reuters, September 1, 2014b. As of December 3, 2020:
http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-miltias-iran-idUSKBN0GW2Y420140901

Cooper, Helene, "U.S. Strategy in Iraq Increasingly Relies on Iran," *New York Times*, March 5, 2015. As of December 3, 2020:
https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/06/world/middleeast/us-strategy-in-iraq-increasingly-relies-on-iran.html

Correlates of War Project, "State System Membership (v2016)," undated. As of August 17, 2020:
https://correlatesofwar.org/data-sets/state-system-membership

Cunningham, Erin, "Iran's Leaders Opposed Kurdish Independence Vote in Iraq. Iran's Kurds Celebrated on the Streets," *Washington Post*, September 26, 2017.

Dagher, Sam, and Asa Fitch, "Iran Expands Role in Syria in Conjunction with Russia's Airstrikes," *Wall Street Journal*, October 2, 2015.

Dalton, Melissa G., "How Iran's Hybrid-War Tactics Help and Hurt It," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 73, No. 5, 2017, pp. 312–315.

DeRouen, Karl R., Jr., "The Indirect Link: Politics, the Economy, and the Use of Force," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 39, No. 4, December 1995, pp. 671–695.

DeRouen, Karl R., Jr., and Jeffrey Peake, "The Dynamics of Diversion: The Domestic Implications of Presidential Use of Force," *International Interactions*, Vol. 28, No. 2, 2002, pp. 191–211.

DeYoung, Karen, and Joby Warrick, "Iran, Hezbollah Build Militia Networks in Syria in Event That Assad Falls, Officials Say," *Washington Post*, February 10, 2013.

Dobbins, James, Philip Gordon, and Jeffrey Martini, *A Peace Plan for Syria III: Agreed Zones of Control, Decentralization, and International Administration*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-233-RC, 2017. As of December 3, 2020: https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE233.html

Dunne, Tim, "Liberalism, International Terrorism, and Democratic Wars," *International Relations*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 2009, pp. 107–114.

Eisenstadt, Michael, *Iranian Military Power: Capabilities and Intentions*, Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1996.

———, "Iran and Iraq," in Robin Wright, ed., *The Iran Primer: Power, Politics, and U.S. Policy*, Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2010, pp. 151–154.

Eisenstadt, Michael, Michael Knights, and Ahmed Ali, "Iran Influence in Iraq: Countering Tehran's Whole-of-Government Approach," Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 2011. As of December 3, 2020: https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-influence-in-iraq-countering-tehrans-whole-of-government-approach

"Emruz keshvarha darbareh-ye Surieh nachar be mozakereh ba Iran hastand / dar hal-e gostaresh-e 'Gordan-e Fatehin' dar kol-e keshvar hastim," *Tasnim News*, October 21, 2016. As of December 2, 2020: https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1395/07/30/1218085/امروز-کشورها-درباره-سوریه-ناچار-به-مذاکره-با-ایران-هستند-در-حال-گسترش-گردان-فاتحین-در-کل-کشور-هستیم

Erdbrink, Thomas, "For Many Iranians, the 'Evidence' Is Clear: ISIS Is an American Invention," *New York Times*, September 10, 2014.

Erdbrink, Thomas, and Mujib Mashal, "At Least 12 Killed in Pair of Terrorist Attacks in Iran," *New York Times*, June 7, 2017. As of December 3, 2020: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/07/world/middleeast/iran-parliament-attack-khomeini-mausoleum.html

Esfandiari, Golnaz, "IS Propaganda Increasingly Targeting Iran and Its Sunnis," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, June 6, 2017. As of December 3, 2020: https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-islamic-state-propaganda-targets-sunnis/28531534.html

Esfandiary, Dina, and Ariane Tabatabai, “Iran’s ISIS Policy,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 1, 2015, pp. 1–15.

———, “Yemen: An Opportunity for Iran-Saudi Dialogue?” *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 2, 2016, pp. 155–174.

“Evacuation of Two Pro-Assad Syrian Villages Complete,” Reuters, July 18, 2018.

Evans, Gareth, Ramesh Thakur, and Robert A. Pape, “Correspondence: Humanitarian Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect,” *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 4, Spring 2013, pp. 199–214.

“Ezam-e mostashari-e takavaran-e type 65 nohad be Surieh / takavaran-e niroo-ye zamini dar Surieh mostaqar shodand,” *Tasnim News*, April 16, 2016. As of December 2, 2020:
https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1395/01/16/1039165/
اعزام-مستشاری-تکاوران-تیپ-65-نوهد-به-سوریه-تکاوران-نیروی-زمینی-در-سوریه-مستقر-شدند

“Faseleh-ye Daesh az ‘marzha-ye Iran’ cheghadr ast? + naqsheh va tasvir,” *Bashgah-e khabarnegaran-e javan*, March 30, 2016. As of January 8, 2021:
https://www.yjc.ir/fa/news/5548805/فاصله-داعش-از-مرزهای-ایران-چقدر-است-نقشه-و-تصاویر

Fassihi, Farnaz, “Iran Deploys Forces to Fight al Qaeda-Inspired Militants in Iraq,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 12, 2014.

Feste, Karen A., *Expanding the Frontiers: Superpower Intervention in the Cold War*, New York: Praeger, 1992.

Findley, Michael G., and Josiah F. Marineau, “Lootable Resources and Third-Party Intervention into Civil Wars,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 32, No. 5, 2015, pp. 465–486.

Findley, Michael G., and Tze Kwang Teo, “Rethinking Third-Party Interventions into Civil Wars: An Actor-Centric Approach,” *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 68, No. 4, November 2006, pp. 828–837.

Fordham, Benjamin O., “Power or Plenty? Economic Interests, Security Concerns, and American Intervention,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 4, December 2008, pp. 737–758.

Frederick, Bryan, Paul R. Hensel, and Christopher Macaulay, “The Issue Correlates of War Territorial Claims Data, 1816–2001,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 54, No. 1, 2017, pp. 99–108.

Friedman, Brandon, “Iran’s Hezbollah Model in Iraq and Syria: Fait Accompli?” *Orbis*, Vol. 62, No. 3, 2018, pp. 438–453.

Gent, Stephen E., “Scapegoating Strategically: Reselection, Strategic Interaction, and the Diversionary Theory of War,” *International Interactions*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 2009, pp. 1–29.

———, "External Threats and Military Intervention: The United States and the Caribbean Basin," *Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2010.

Georgy, Michael, and Ahmed Rasheed, "Iranian Commander Issued Stark Warning to Iraqi Kurds over Kirkuk," Reuters, October 20, 2017. As of December 3, 2020:
https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-kirkuk-fall/iranian-commander-issued-stark-warning-to-iraqi-kurds-over-kirkuk-idUSKBN1CP2CW

Ghosn, Faten, Glenn Palmer, and Stuart A. Bremer, "The MID3 Data Set, 1993–2001: Procedures, Coding Rules, and Description," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 21, No. 2, Summer 2004, pp. 133–154.

Gibbons-Neff, Thomas, Jeremy White, and David Botti, "The U.S. Has Troops in Syria. So Do the Russians and Iranians. Here's Where," *New York Times*, April 11, 2018. As of January 7, 2021:
https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/04/11/world/middleeast/syria-military-us-russia-iran.html

Gleditsch, Nils Petter, Peter Wallensteen, Mikael Eriksson, Margareta Sollenberg, and Håvard Strand, "Armed Conflict 1946–2001: A New Dataset," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 39, No. 5, September 2002, pp. 615–637.

Gohel, Sajjan M., "Iran's Ambiguous Role in Afghanistan," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 3, No. 3, March 2010, pp. 13–16. As of December 3, 2020:
https://ctc.usma.edu/irans-ambiguous-role-in-afghanistan/

Golby, James, Peter Feaver, and Kyle Dropp, "Elite Military Cues and Public Opinion About the Use of Military Force," *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol. 44, No. 1, 2018, pp. 44–71.

Gold, Zack, "Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI): An Al-Qaeda Affiliate Case Study," Arlington, Va.: CNA, October 2017.

Gordon, Michael R., "Iran Supplying Syrian Military via Iraqi Airspace," *New York Times*, September 4, 2012. As of December 3, 2020:
https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/05/world/middleeast/iran-supplying-syrian-military-via-iraq-airspace.html

Groeling, Tim, and Matthew A. Baum, "Crossing the Water's Edge: Elite Rhetoric, Media Coverage, and the Rally-Round-the-Flag Phenomenon," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 70, No. 4, October 2008, pp. 1065–1085.

Gurses, Mehmet, "Transnational Ethnic Kin and Civil War Outcomes," *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 68, No. 1, 2015, pp. 142–153.

"Hadad-e Adel: Agar Iran Nabud Iraq va Surieh be dast-e Daesh mioftadand," *Tasnim News*, April 23, 2019. As of December 3, 2020:
https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1398/02/03/1995295/
حدادعادل-اگر-ایران-نبود-عراق-و-سوریه-به-دست-داعش-می-افتاد

Harold, Scott W., and Alireza Nader, *China and Iran: Economic, Political, and Military Relations*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, OP-351-CMEPP, 2012. As of January 8, 2021:
https://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP351.html

Hatahet, Sinan, *Russia and Iran: Economic Influence in Syria*, London: Chatham House, March 2019. As of December 3, 2020:
https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/russia-and-iran-economic-influence-in-syria

Haynes, Kyle, "Diversionary Conflict: Demonizing Enemies or Demonstrating Competence?" *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 34, No. 4, 2017, pp. 337–358.

Heath, Timothy R., "Developments in China's Military Force Projection and Expeditionary Capabilities," testimony presented before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission on January 21, 2016, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, CT-450, 2016. As of January 7, 2021:
https://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT450.html

Heath, Timothy R., Christian Curriden, Bryan Frederick, Nathan Chandler, and Jennifer Kavanagh, *China's Military Interventions: Patterns, Drivers, and Signposts*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A444-4, 2021.

Heras, Nicholas A, Bassam Barabandi, and Nidal Betare, "Deir Azzour Tribal Mapping Project," Center for a New American Security, September 2017.

Hiro, Dilip, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict*, London: Grafton, 1989.

Horowitz, Michael C., and Matthew Fuhrmann, "Studying Leaders and Military Conflict: Conceptual Framework and Research Agenda," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 62, No. 10, 2018, pp. 2072–2086.

Horowitz, Michael C., and Allan C. Stam, "How Prior Military Experience Influences the Future Militarized Behavior of Leaders," *International Organization*, Vol. 68, No. 3, Summer 2014, pp. 527–559.

"Hozur-e sardar Soleimani dar kenar-e razmandehgan-e Fatemiyoun dar khatt-e moqadam-e jebheh-ye Surieh + film," Bashgah-e khabarnegaran-e javan, March 28, 2018. As of December 3, 2020:
https://www.yjc.ir/fa/news/6484734/
حضور-سردار-سلیمانی-در-کنار-رزمندگان-فاطمیون-در-خط-مقدم-جبهه-سوریه-فیلم

Hubbard, Ben, Isabel Kershner, and Anne Barnard, "Iran, Deeply Embedded in Syria, Expands 'Axis of Resistance,'" *New York Times*, February 19, 2018. As of December 3, 2020:
https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/19/world/middleeast/iran-syria-israel.html

Hubbard, Ben, and Eric Schmitt, "Military Skill and Terrorist Technique Fuel Success of ISIS," *New York Times*, August 27, 2014. As of December 3, 2020:
https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/28/world/middleeast/army-know-how-seen-as-factor-in-isis-successes.html

Huibregtse, Ada, "External Intervention in Ethnic Conflict," *International Interactions*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2010, pp. 265–293.

Human Rights Council, "Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the Situation of Human Rights in the Syrian Arab Republic," United Nations General Assembly, A/HRC/18/53, September 15, 2011.

Human Rights Watch, "Iran: Halt the Crackdown," June 19, 2009. As of December 4, 2020:
https://www.hrw.org/news/2009/06/19/iran-halt-crackdown#

———, *'We Live as in War': Crackdown on Protesters in the Governate of Homs*, New York, November 2011. As of December 9, 2020:
https://www.hrw.org/report/2011/11/11/we-live-war/crackdown-protesters-governorate-homs-syria

———, *Attacks on Ghouta: Analysis of Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria*, New York, September 2013. As of December 3, 2020:
https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/09/10/attacks-ghouta/analysis-alleged-use-chemical-weapons-syria

———, "Syria: Coordinated Chemical Attacks on Aleppo," February 13, 2017. As of December 9, 2020:
https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/02/13/syria-coordinated-chemical-attacks-aleppo

———, *World Report 2019: Syria, Events of 2018*, New York, 2019, pp. 554–561.

Humud, Carla, Christopher Blanchard, Jeremy Sharp, and Jim Zanotti, "Iranian Assistance to Groups in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and the Palestinian Territories," memorandum to Senator Mark Kirk, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, July 31, 2015.

Hunter, Shireen T., "Iran and the Spread of Revolutionary Islam," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 2, April 1988, pp. 730–749.

Huth, Paul K., "Major Power Intervention in International Crises, 1918–1988," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 42, No. 6, December 1998, pp. 744–770.

Iddon, Paul, "Iran Bombarded Iraq Throughout the 1990s," War Is Boring, July 23, 2018. As of December 3, 2020:
https://warisboring.com/iran-bombarded-iraq-throughout-the-1990s/

International Crisis Group, “Golan Heights and South/West Syria,” accessed June 12, 2019. As of December 2, 2020:
https://www.crisisgroup.org/trigger-list/iran-us-trigger-list/flashpoints/golan-heights

“Iran dar khatar-e jedi ast/Daesh bayad dar Surieh va Iraq mahar shaved,” *Mashregh News*, June 1, 2015. As of December 3, 2020:
https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/423479/
ایران-در-خطر-جدی-است-داعش-باید-در-سوریه-و-عراق-مهار-شود

“Iran Not Seeking Permission for Supporting Iraq,” *Islamic Republic News Agency*, September 25, 2014. As of December 3, 2020:
https://en.irna.ir/news/2738699/Iran-not-seeking-permission-for-supporting-Iraq

“Iraq Says It Shared Information That France, U.S., Iran Were Targets,” Reuters, November 15, 2015. As of December 4, 2020:
https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-shooting-iraq-idUSKCN0T40EF20151115

Irish, John, and Ahmed Rasheed, “Exclusive: Iran Moves Missiles to Iraq in Warning to Enemies,” Reuters, August 31, 2018. As of December 4, 2020:
https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-iraq-missiles-exclusive/exclusive-iran-moves-missiles-to-iraq-in-warning-to-enemies-idUSKCN1LG0WB

Jalabi, Raya, “Iran Seen as Winner After Iraq’s Kurds Lose Referendum Gamble,” Reuters, October 31, 2017. As of December 4, 2020:
https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-kurds-politics/iran-seen-as-winner-after-iraqs-kurds-lose-referendum-gamble-idUSKBN1D01XQ

Jamal, Ahmad Shuja, *The Fatemiyoun Army: Reintegration into Afghan Society*, Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, March 2019.

James, Patrick, and John R. Oneal, “The Influence of Domestic and International Politics on the President’s Use of Force,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 35, No. 2, June 1991, pp. 307–332.

Joint Publication 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, April 25, 2018.

Jones, Daniel M., Stuart A. Bremer, and J. David Singer, “Militarized Interstate Disputes, 1816–1992: Rationale, Coding Rules, and Empirical Patterns,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 1996, pp. 163–213.

Jones, Seth G., “War by Proxy: Iran’s Growing Footprint in the Middle East,” Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2019.

Jones, Seth G., James Dobbins, Daniel Byman, Christopher S. Chivvis, Ben Connable, Jeffrey Martini, Eric Robinson, and Nathan Chandler, *Rolling Back the Islamic State*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1912, 2017. As of December 4, 2020:
https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1912.html

"Jozeeyat-e razmayesh-e Sepah-e Pasdaran dar marzha-ye gharbi-e keshvar," *Tasnim News*, September 24, 2017. As of December 4, 2020: https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/07/02/1528553/
جزئیات-رزمایش-سپاه-پاسداران-در-مرزهای-غربی-کشور

"Joz'eyat-e dargiri-ye kolah sabzha-ye Artesh ba terrorist-ha dar Halab/ Halakat-e 200 takfiri," *Tasnim News*, April 12, 2016. As of December 4, 2020: https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1395/01/24/1046840/
جزئیات-درگیری-کلاه-سبزهای-ارتش-با-تروریست-ها-در-حلب-هلاکت-200-تکفیری

Juneau, Thomas, "Iran Under Rouhani: Still Alone in the World," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 21, No. 4, Winter 2014, pp. 92–104.

———, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iranian Foreign Policy*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2015.

———, "Iran's Policy Towards the Houthis in Yemen: A Limited Return on a Modest Investment," *International Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 3, May 2016, pp. 647–663.

———, "Iran's Costly Intervention in Syria: A Pyrrhic Victory," *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 2020, pp. 26–44.

Juneau, Thomas, and Sam Razavi, "Introduction: Alone in the World," in Thomas Juneau and Sam Razavi, eds., *Iranian Foreign Policy Since 2001: Alone in the World*, New York: Routledge, 2013, pp. 1–17.

Kaarbo, Juliet, "Prime Minister Leadership Style and the Role of Parliament in Security Policy," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2018, pp. 35–51.

Karsh, Efraim, "Geopolitical Determinism: The Origins of the Iran-Iraq War," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 44, No. 2, Spring 1980, pp. 256–268.

———, ed., *The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989.

Kathman, Jacob D., "Civil War Contagion and Neighboring Intervention," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 4, December 2010, pp. 989–1012.

———, "Civil War Diffusion and Regional Motivations for Intervention," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 55, No. 6, 2011, pp. 847–876.

Katz, Brian, "Axis Rising: Iran's Evolving Regional Strategy and Non-State Partnerships in the Middle East," Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 2018. As of December 4, 2020: https://www.csis.org/analysis/axis-rising-irans-evolving-regional-strategy-and-non-state-partnerships-middle-east

Kavanagh, Jennifer, Bryan Frederick, Nathan Chandler, Samuel Charap, Timothy R. Heath, Ariane M. Tabatabai, Edward Geist, and Christian Curriden, *Anticipating Adversary Military Interventions*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A444-1, 2021.

Kavanagh, Jennifer, Bryan Frederick, Matthew Povlock, Stacie L. Pettyjohn, Angela O'Mahony, Stephen Watts, Nathan Chandler, John Speed Meyers, and Eugeniu Hau, *The Past, Present, and Future of U.S. Ground Interventions: Identifying Trends, Characteristics, and Signposts*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1831-A, 2017. As of January 7, 2021:
https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1831.html

Kavanagh, Jennifer, Bryan Frederick, Alexandra Stark, Nathan Chandler, Meagan L. Smith, Matthew Povlock, Lynn E. Davis, and Edward Geist, *Characteristics of Successful U.S. Military Interventions*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3062-A, 2019. As of December 4, 2020:
https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3062.html

Kershner, Isabel, "Iran Fires Rockets into Golan Heights from Syria, Israelis Say," *New York Times,* May 9, 2018. As of December 4, 2020:
https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/09/world/middleeast/israel-iran-attack.html

Khalaf, Roula, and Sam Jones, "Selling Terror: How ISIS Details Its Brutality," *Financial Times*, June 17, 2014.

Khamenei, Ali, "Bayaniat dar didar-e khanevadeh-haye shohada-ye haftom-e Tir va Jam'ee az khanevadeh-haye shohada-ye modafe'e haram," Khamenei.ir, June 25, 2016.

"Khun-e shohada-ye modafe'-e haram-e yegan-e Tafehin masir-e harakat-e ayandeh ra tarsim mikonad," *Tasnim News*, February 1, 2016. As of December 4, 2020:
https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1394/11/12/987267/
خون-شهدای-مدافع-حرم%D9%90-یگان-فاتحین-مسیر-حرکت-آینده-را-ترسیم-می-کند

Kirdar, M. J., "Al Qaeda in Iraq," Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2011.

Kisangani, Emizet F., and Jeffrey Pickering, *International Military Intervention, 1989–2005*, Ann Arbor, Mich.: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, Data Collection No. 21282, University of Michigan, 2008.

Klarevas, Louis, "The 'Essential Domino' of Military Operations: American Public Opinion and the Use of Force," *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 3, No. 4, November 2002, pp. 417–437.

Knights, Michael, "The Evolution of Iran's Special Groups in Iraq," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 3, No. 11–12, November 2010, pp. 12–16.

Koch, Michael T., and Patricia Sullivan, "Should I Stay or Should I Go Now? Partisanship, Approval, and the Duration of Major Power Democratic Military Interventions," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 72, No. 3, July 2010, pp. 616–629.

Kocs, Stephen A., "Territorial Disputes and Interstate War, 1945–1987," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 57, No. 1, February 1995, pp. 159–175.

"Kolah sabzha-ye Artesh tebq-e kodam qanun be Surieh raftand?" *Tasnim News*, April 23, 2016.

Lagon, Mark P., "The International System and the Reagan Doctrine: Can Realism Explain Aid to 'Freedom Fighters'?" *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 22, No. 1, January 1992, pp. 39–70.

Lahoud, Nelly, *Al-Qa'ida's Contested Relationship with Iran: The View from Abbottabad*, Washington, D.C.: New America, August 20, 2018. As of December 4, 2020:
https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/al-qaidas-contested-relationship-iran/

Larson, Eric V., and Bogdan Savych, *American Public Support for U.S. Military Operations from Mogadishu to Baghdad*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-231-A, 2005. As of January 7, 2021:
https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG231.html

Leeds, Brett Ashley, and David R. Davis, "Domestic Political Vulnerability and International Disputes," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 6, December 1997, pp. 814–834.

Longley Alley, April, Ali Vaez, Heiko Wimmen, and Ofer Zalzberg, *Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East*, Washington, D.C.: International Crisis Group, April 13, 2018. As of December 4, 2020:
https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/184-irans-priorities-turbulent-middle-east

"Ma be Surieh razmandeh-e nabordeh-im/Da'esh bara-ye Iran tashkil shodeh ast na Surieh," *Iranian Students News Agency*, October 5, 2016. As of December 4, 2020:
https://www.isna.ir/news/95071409366/
ما-به-سوریه-رزمنده-ای-نبرده-ایم-داعش-برای-ایران-تشکیل-شده-است

Majara-ye gofteh nashodeh az bombaran-e mavaze'-e DAESH tavasot-e jangadeha-ye Artesh," *Tasnim News*, September 21, 2017. As of December 4, 2020:
https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/06/30/1526280/ماجرای-گفته-نشده-از-بمباران-مواضع-داعش-توسط-جنگنده-های-ارتش-شخصاً-وارد-خاک-عراق-شدم

Maloney, Suzanne, "ISIS Attacks Iran and Accusations Fly," *Markaz*, Brookings Institution blog, June 9, 2017. As of December 4, 2020:
https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/06/09/isis-attacks-iran-and-accusations-fly/

"Maneuver-e qodrat-e Iran va Iraq moqabel-e America," *Javan Online*, March 14, 2019. As of January 8, 2021:
https://www.javanonline.ir/fa/news/949310/مانور-قدرت-ایران-و-عراق-مقابل-امریکا

Mapping Militant Organizations, "The Islamic State," Stanford University, updated June 2018. As of December 9, 2020:
https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/islamic-state

Mattis, Jim, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, Arlington, Va.: U.S. Department of Defense, 2018.

Massie, Justin, and Benjamin Zyla, "Alliance Value and Status Enhancement: Canada's Disproportionate Military Burden Sharing in Afghanistan," *Politics and Policy*, Vol. 46, No. 2, April 2018, pp. 320–344.

Mazzar, Michael J., Timothy R. Heath, and Astrid Stuth Cevallos, *China and the International Order*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2423-OSD, 2018. As of January 7, 2021:
https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2423.html

McCants, William, "Who Is Islamic State Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi?" *BBC News*, March 8, 2016. As of December 4, 2020:
https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35694311

McNaugher, Thomas L., "Ballistic Missiles and Chemical Weapons: The Legacy of the Iran-Iraq War," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 2, Fall 1990, pp. 5–34.

Meernik, James, "Presidential Decision Making and the Political Use of Military Force," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 1, March 1994, pp. 121–138.

———, "Domestic Politics and the Political Use of Military Force by the United States," *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 4, December 2001, pp. 889–904.

Menashri, David, *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran: Religion, Society and Power*, London: Routledge, 2001.

Milani, Mohsen, "Why Tehran Won't Abandon Assad(ism)," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 4, 2013, pp. 79–93.

———, "Iran's Policy Toward Afghanistan," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 2, 2006, pp. 235–256.

Pew Research Center, *Mapping the Global Muslim Population: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Muslim Population*, Washington, D.C., October 2009. As of December 4, 2020:
https://www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population/

Mohseni, Ebrahim, Nancy Gallagher, and Clay Ramsay, *Iranian Attitudes in Advance of the Parliamentary Elections: Economics, Politics, and Foreign Affairs*, College Park, Md.: Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland, January 2016. As of December 4, 2020:
https://cissm.umd.edu/research-impact/publications/iranian-attitudes-advance-parliamentary-elections-economics-politics

Morgenthau, Hans J., "To Intervene or Not to Intervene," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 45, No. 3, April 1967, pp. 425–436.

Most, Benjamin A., and Harvey Starr, *Inquiry, Logic and International Politics*, Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1989.

Murray, Williamson, and Kevin Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Nader, Alireza, *Iran's Role in Iraq: Room for Cooperation?* Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-151-OSD, 2015. As of December 4, 2020:
https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE151.html

Nader, Alireza, Ali G. Scotten, Ahmad Rahmani, Robert Stewart, and Leila Mahnad, *Iran's Influence in Afghanistan: Implications for the U.S. Drawdown*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-616, 2014. As of December 4, 2020:
https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR616.html

Nakhoul, Samia, "Iran Expands Regional 'Empire' Ahead of Nuclear Deal," Reuters, March 23, 2015. As of January 8, 2021:
https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-iran-region-insight/iran-expands-regional-empire-ahead-of-nuclear-deal-idUSKBN0MJ1G520150323

Nasr, Vali, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*, revised ed., New York: Norton, 2016.

"Nasrullah: Iran emperaturo nist balke keshvari ast Islami ke be mellat-ha komak mikonad," *Tasnim News*, March 27, 2015. As of December 4, 2020:
https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1394/01/07/696524/نصرالله-ایران-امپراطوری-نیست-بلکه-کشوری-اسلامی-است-که-به-ملت-ها-کمک-می-کند-شکست-آل-سعود-قطعی-است

Nome, Martin Austvoll, "Transnational Ethnic Ties and Military Intervention: Taking Sides in Civil Conflicts in Europe, Asia and North Africa, 1944–99," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 19, No. 4, 2013, pp. 747–771.

Olson, Erik A., "Iran's Path Dependent Military Doctrine," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 2, Summer 2016, pp. 63–93.

Ostovar, Afshon, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

———, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran's Way of War," *Security Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2019, pp. 159–188.

Ostrom, Charles W., and Brian L. Job, "The President and the Political Use of Force," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 80, No. 2, June 1986, pp. 541–566.

Palmer, Glenn, Vito D'Orazio, Michael Kenwick, and Matthew Lane, "The MID4 Dataset, 2002–2010: Procedures, Coding Rules and Description," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 32, No. 2, 2015, pp. 222–242.

"Parvaz-e jangandeha-ye Artesh dar marz-e gharbi-e keshvar," *Tasnim News*, September 25, 2017. As of December 4, 2020:
https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/07/03/1529030/پرواز-جنگنده-های-ارتش-در-مرزهای-غربی-کشور

Pearson, Frederic S., and Robert Baumann, "Foreign Military Intervention and Changes in United States Business Activity," *Journal of Political and Military Sociology*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1977, pp. 79–97.

———, *International Military Intervention, 1946–1988*, Ann Arbor, Mich.: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, Data Collection No. 6035, University of Michigan, 1993.

Peksen, Dursun, and Marie Olson Lounsbery, "Beyond the Target State: Foreign Military Intervention and Neighboring State Stability," *International Interactions*, Vol. 38, No. 3, 2012, pp. 348–374.

Pelletiere, Stephen C., *The Iran-Iraq War: Chaos in a Vacuum*, New York: Praeger, 1992.

Pelletiere, Stephen C., and Douglas V. Johnson II, *Lessons Learned: The Iran-Iraq War*, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 1991.

Phillips, Macon, "President Obama: 'The Future of Syria Must Be Determined by Its People, but President Bashar al-Assad Is Standing in Their Way,'" White House, August 18, 2011. As of December 4, 2020:
https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/08/18/president-obama-future-syria-must-be-determined-its-people-president-bashar-al-assad

Pilster, Ulrich, Tobias Böhmelt, and Atsushi Tago, "Political Leadership Changes and the Withdrawal from Military Coalition Operations, 1946–2001," *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 16, No. 4, November 2015, pp. 463–483.

Pollack, Kenneth M., "Containing Iran," in Robin Wright, ed., *The Iran Primer: Power, Politics, and U.S. Policy*, Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2010, pp. 209–211.

———, "Iranian Airstrikes in Iraq Are a Warning and a Sign of Progress," *Markaz*, Brookings Institution blog, December 3, 2014. As of August 7, 2020:
https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2014/12/03/iranian-airstrikes-in-iraq-are-a-warning-and-a-sign-of-progress/

———, "Iran in Iraq," Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council, December 2017.

Posen, Barry R., "Nationalism, the Mass Army, and Military Power," *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Fall 1993, pp. 80–124.

Post, Jerrold M., "Saddam Hussein of Iraq: A Political Psychology Profile," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 12, No. 2, June 1991, pp. 279–289.

Potter, Lawrence G., and Gary G. Sick, eds., *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

Razoux, Pierre, *The Iran-Iraq War*, trans. Nicholas Elliott, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015.

Reisinezhad, Arash, *The Shah of Iran, the Iraqi Kurds, and the Lebanese Shia*, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Rieff, David, "The Shiite Surge," *New York Times*, February 1, 2004. As of December 8, 2020:
https://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/01/magazine/the-shiite-surge.html

Rost, Nicolas, and J. Michael Greig, "Taking Matters into Their Own Hands: An Analysis of the Determinants of State-Conducted Peacekeeping in Civil Wars," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 48, No. 2, 2011, pp. 171–184.

Rubin, Alissa J., "Militant Leader in Rare Appearance in Iraq," *New York Times*, July 5, 2014. As of December 9, 2020:
https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/06/world/asia/iraq-abu-bakr-al-baghdad i-sermon-video.html

Ryan, Missy, and Loveday Morris, "The U.S. and Iran Are Aligned in Iraq Against the Islamic State – For Now," *Washington Post*, December 27, 2014.

Sadjadpour, Karim, "Iran's Unwavering Support to Assad's Syria," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 6, No. 8, August 2013, pp. 11–13. As of December 9, 2020:
https://ctc.usma.edu/irans-unwavering-support-to-assads-syria/

Salamey, Imad, and Zanoubia Othman, "Shia Revival and *Welayat Al-Faqih* in the Making of Iranian Foreign Policy," *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2011, pp. 197–212.

Samii, Abbas William, "The Shah's Lebanon Policy: The Role of the SAVAK," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1, January 1997, pp. 66–91.

Sarkees, Meredith Reid, and Frank Whelon Wayman, *Resort to War: A Data Guide to Inter-State, Extra-State, Intra-State, and Non-State Wars, 1816–2007*, Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2010.

Saul, Jonathan, and Parisa Hafezi, "Iran Boosts Military Support in Syria to Bolster Assad," Reuters, February 20, 2014. As of December 9, 2020:
https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-iran/iran-boosts-military-support-i n-syria-to-bolster-assad-idUSBREA1K09U20140221

Saunders, Elizabeth N., “Transformative Choices: Leaders and the Origins of Intervention Strategy,” *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 2, Fall 2009, pp. 119–161.

———, *Leaders at War: How Presidents Shape Military Interventions*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011.

Schiavenza, Matt, “Why Iraq’s Military Has No Will to Fight,” *The Atlantic*, May 25, 2015. As of December 9, 2020:
https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/05/why-iraqs-military-has-no-will-to-fight/394067/

Schmitt, Eric, and Tim Arango, “Billions from U.S. Fail to Sustain Foreign Forces, *New York Times*, October 13, 2015. As of December 9, 2020:
https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/04/world/middleeast/uss-billions-fail-to-sustain-foreign-forces.html

Schofield, Richard N., *Evolution of the Shatt al-’Arab Boundary Dispute*, Cambridgeshire, United Kingdom: Middle East and North African Studies Press, 1986.

Semple, Kirk, “Yazidi Girls Seized by ISIS Speak Out After Escape,” *New York Times*, November 14, 2014. As of December 9, 2020:
https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/15/world/middleeast/yazidi-girls-seized-by-isis-speak-out-after-escape.html

Shanker, Thom, and Steven R. Weisman, “Iran Is Helping Insurgents in Iraq, U.S. Officials Say,” *New York Times*, September 20, 2004. As of December 9, 2020:
https://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/20/politics/iran-is-helping-insurgents-in-iraq-us-officials-say.html

Sharafedin, Bozorgmehr, “Iran Smashes ‘Terrorist Cell’, Warning of Threat from Islamic State,” Reuters, November 18, 2015. As of December 9, 2020:
https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-arrests-islamic-state-idUSKCN0T729720151118

———, “Death Toll Among Iran’s Forces in Syrian War Passes 1,000,” Reuters, November 22, 2016. As of December 9, 2020:
https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-iran/death-toll-among-irans-forces-in-syrian-war-passes-1000-idUSKBN13H16J

Sherlock, Ruth, “Iran Boosts Support to Syria,” *The Telegraph*, February 21, 2014.

Smyth, Phillip, “All the Ayatollah’s Men,” *Foreign Policy*, September 18, 2014.

Soufan, Ali, “Qassem Soleimani and Iran’s Unique Regional Strategy,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 11, No. 10, November 2018, pp. 1–12.

Soufan Center, *Iran’s Playbook: Deconstructing Tehran’s Regional Strategy*, New York, May 2019.

Stein, Ewan, "Ideological Codependency and Regional Order: Iran, Syria, and the Axis of Refusal," *PS: Political Science & Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 3, July 2017, pp. 676–680.

Sullivan, Patricia L., and Michael T. Koch, "Military Intervention by Powerful States, 1945–2003," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 46, No. 5, September 2009, pp. 707–718.

Tabatabai, Ariane M., "ISIS Hits Iran: Terror Comes to the Islamic Republic," *Foreign Affairs*, July 4, 2017.

———, *Iran's National Security Debate: Implications for Future U.S.-Iran Negotiations*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-344-RC, 2019. As of December 9, 2020:
https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE344.html

Tabatabai, Ariane M., and Dina Esfandiary, "Cooperating with Iran to Combat ISIS in Iraq," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 3, 2017, pp. 129–146.

Tabatabai, Ariane M., and Annie Tracy Samuel, "What the Iran-Iraq War Tells Us About the Future of the Iran Nuclear Deal," *International Security*, Vol. 42, No. 1, Summer 2017, pp. 152–185.

Tahir-Kheli, Shirin, and Shaheen Ayubi, eds., *The Iran-Iraq War: New Weapons, Old Conflicts*, New York: Praeger, 1983.

Takeyh, Ray, "Iran, Israel and the Politics of Terrorism," *Survival*, Vol. 48, No. 4, 2006, pp. 83–96.

———, "Iran's New Iraq," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 62, No. 1, Winter 2008, pp. 13–30.

———, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs*, Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Tarock, Adam, "The Politics of the Pipeline: The Iran and Afghanistan Conflict," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 4, August 1999, pp. 801–819.

Tarzi, Amin, and Darby Parliament, "Missile Messages: Iran Strikes MKO Bases in Iraq," *Nonproliferation Review*, Summer 2001, pp. 125–133. As of December 9, 2002:
https://www.nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/npr/82tarzi.pdf

"Tasavir-e didehnashodeh az Sardar Soleimani dar jang ba Daesh," *Masregh News*, November 22, 2017. As of January 8, 2021:
https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/801387/
تصاویر-دیده-نشده-از-سردار-سلیمانی-در-جنگ-با-داعش

"Taslihat-e Iran ke Daesh bayad az anha betarsad," *Diplomacy-e Irani*, April 9, 2015. As of January 8, 2021:
http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/1946171/تسلیحات-ایران-که-داعش-باید-از-آنها-بترسد

Tisdall, Simon, "Iran Helping Syrian Regime Crack Down on Protesters, Say Diplomats," *The Guardian*, May 8, 2011. As of December 9, 2020: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/may/08/iran-helping-syrian-regime-protesters

"Toseeh-ye ravabet-e eqtesadi-e Iran va Iraq edamdeh darad," *Iranian Students News Agency*, July 6, 2019. As of January 8, 2021: https://www.isna.ir/news/98041507723/توسعه-روابط-اقتصادی-ایران-و-عراق-ادامه-دارد

Tracy Samuel, Annie, *Perceptions and Narratives of Security: The Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps and the Iran-Iraq War*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, May 2012.

Trenin, Dmitri, "Russia in the Middle East: Moscow's Objectives, Priorities, and Policy Drivers," New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Task Force on U.S. Policy Toward Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia, 2016.

"UAE Reopens Syrica Embassy in Boost for Assad," Reuters, December 27, 2018. As of January 8, 2021: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-emirates/uae-reopens-syria-embassy-in-boost-for-assad-idUSKCN1OQ0QV/

U.S. Army, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War:* Vol. I, *Invasions, Insurgency, Civil War 2003–2006*, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: U.S. Army War College Press, 2019a.

———, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War:* Vol. II, *Surge and Withdrawal 2007–2011*, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: U.S. Army War College Press, 2019b.

Van Evera, Stephen, "Hypotheses on Nationalism and War," *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 4, Spring 1994, pp. 5–39.

"Video: Iran Raids Takfiri Lair in Tehran," *Press TV*, June 22, 2016. As of December 9, 2020: http://www.presstv.com/Detail/2016/06/22/471597/Iran-Tehran-Daesh-Intelligence-Ministry-Mahmoud-Alavi-Saudi-Arabia

Wagner, Wolfgang, "Is There a Parliamentary Peace? Parliamentary Veto Power and Military Interventions from Kosovo to Daesh," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2018, pp. 121–134.

Walker, Martin, "The Revenge of the Shia," *Wilson Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 4, Fall 2006, pp. 16–20.

Watts, Stephen, Bryan Frederick, Jennifer Kavanagh, Angela O'Mahony, Thomas S. Szayna, Matthew Lane, Alexander Stephenson, and Colin P. Clarke, *A More Peaceful World? Regional Conflict Trends and U.S. Defense Planning*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1177-A, 2017. As of April 27, 2020: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1177.html

Way, Lucan A., "The Limits of Autocracy Promotion: The Case of Russia in the 'Near Abroad,'" *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 54, No. 4, November 2015, pp. 691–706.

Weeks, Jessica L., "Strongmen and Straw Men: Authoritarian Regimes and the Initiation of International Conflict," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 106, No. 2, May 2012, pp. 326–347.

Wehrey, Frederic, Jerrold D. Green, Brian Nichiporuk, Lydia Hansell, Rasool Nafisi, and S. R. Bohandy, *The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-821-OSD, 2009. As of December 3, 2020:
https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG821.html

Wehrey, Frederic, David E. Thaler, Nora Bensahel, Kim Cragin, Jerrold D. Green, Dalia Dassa Kaye, Nadia Oweidat, and Jennifer J. Li, *Dangerous but Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-781-AF, 2009. As of October 30, 2019:
https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG781.html

White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C., December 2017.

———, *National Strategy for Counterterrorism of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C., October 2018.

Winter, Stefan, *A History of the 'Alawis: From Medieval Aleppo to the Turkish Republic*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016.

World Public Opinion, "Iran Poll Shows Rouhani Comes Out of Election with Broad-Based Support," March 31, 2016.

Worth, Robert F., and Nazila Fathi, "Protests Flare in Tehran as Opposition Disputes Vote," *New York Times*, June 13, 2009. As of December 9, 2020:
https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/14/world/middleeast/14iran.html

Wright, Lawrence, "ISIS's Savage Strategy in Iraq," *New Yorker*, June 16, 2014. As of December 9, 2020:
https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/isiss-savage-strategy-in-iraq

Wright, Robin, "Russia and Iran Deepen Ties to Challenge Trump and the United States," *New Yorker*, March 2, 2018. As of January 7, 2021:
https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/russia-and-iran-deepen-ties-to-challenge-trump-and-the-united-states

Wright, Robin, J. M. Berger, William Braniff, et al., *The Jihadi Threat: ISIS, al-Qaeda, and Beyond*, Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace and the Wilson Center, December 2016/January 2017. As of December 9, 2020:
https://www.usip.org/publications/2016/12/jihadi-threat-isis-al-qaeda-and-beyond

Wu, Joshua Su-Ya, and Austin J. Knuppe, "My Brother's Keeper? Religious Cues and Support for Foreign Military Intervention," *Politics and Religion*, Vol. 9, No. 3, September 2016, pp. 537–565.

Yaron, Oded, “No Selfies for Soleimani: Instagram Briefly Blocks Iranian General’s Account,” *Haaretz*, May 27, 2016. As of December 9, 2020: https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/.premium-instagram-removes-iranian-general-soleimani-s-account-1.5388428

Yeginsu, Ceylan, “ISIS Draws a Steady Stream of Recruits from Turkey,” *New York Times*, September 15, 2014. As of December 9, 2020: https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/16/world/europe/turkey-is-a-steady-source-of-isis-recruits.html

Yoon, Mi Yung, “Explaining US Intervention in Third World Internal Wars, 1945–1989,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 4, August 1997, pp. 580–602.

Zarif, Javad [@JZarif], “When @realdonaldtrump insisted that ‘Iran is killing ISIS’, exactly who did he think was doing the fighting & making the sacrifice? ISIS would’ve held two Arab capitals & fielded a Terrorist Army on Europe’s doorstep had #IRGC not fought alongside brave peoples of Iraq & Syria.” Twitter post, April 10, 2019. As of December 9, 2020: https://twitter.com/jzarif/status/1116029968759361538

“Zarif Video Message from Vienna,” *Iran Primer*, United States Institute of Peace blog, July 3, 2015. As of January 8, 2021: https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2015/jul/03/zarif-video-message-vienna

Ziegler, Charles E., “Contesting the Responsibility to Protect,” *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 17, No. 1, February 2016, pp. 75–97.

Zogby Research Services, *Today’s Middle East: Pressures and Challenges*, Washington, D.C., November 2014.

RAND ARROYO CENTER

In recent years, Iran has risen as one of the most significant regional challenges faced by the United States, with Tehran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs, support for terrorist groups and militias, cyber activities and influence operations, and military interventions in the region.

In this report, the authors assess when, where, why, and how Iran conducts military interventions and identify key signposts of Iranian military interventions that can be used as early warning indicators for U.S. military planners and that can guide decisions about the use of forces in the Middle East region. They identify the factors that are most likely to shape Iran's military intervention decisions and analyze those factors as they relate to two detailed case studies: (1) Iran's involvement in the ongoing Syrian civil war and (2) Iran's post-2014 intervention in Iraq to counter the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

The future of great-power competition and how it plays out in the Middle East, coupled with the regional landscape, are important factors that will shape how Iran sees its military activities. Although a move away from a period of greater U.S. power in the region would seem to provide fewer threats and more opportunities for Iran, the relations among Beijing, Moscow, and Washington and how they affect Iranian perceptions of the regional balance of power bear careful monitoring.

$33.00

ISBN-10 1-9774-0660-2
ISBN-13 978-1-9774-0660-6

53300

9 781977 406606

www.rand.org

RR-A444-2